TRAPPED IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF DAN JACOBSON

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INTRODUCTION

Dan Jacobson has written short stories, many non-fiction articles and eight novels: *The Trap* (1955), *A Dance in The Sun* (1956), *The Price of Diamonds* (1957), *The Evidence of Love* (1959), *The Beginners* (1966), *The Rape of Tamar* (1970), *The Wonder-Worker* (1973), and *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* (1977).[1] The first five are all set in South Africa, though Jacobson has been living in England since 1954, i.e. since before his first novel was published. A distinct break in terms of subject matter and voice occurs after *The Beginners*, giving Jacobson what he calls "two rounds"[2] as a novelist. But critics recognizing this break seem not to have recognized that all eight novels are linked by certain thematic preoccupations, notably the notion of the trapped identity, which this thesis will attempt to demonstrate.[3]

On a first reading of Jacobson's work one is drawn to affirm his portrayal of the position of the white English-speaking South African, but a closer reading reveals that he does not speak as vitally to the South African situation as he seems to, or has been taken to do. Why this should be so is the second main concern of this thesis.

In the first chapter the expectations underlying English literary activity in South Africa are outlined, as this is a necessary background to the discussion of Jacobson's South African novels. A brief biographical background is also given and the relationship between his own experience and his development as a novelist suggested. Subsequent chapters deal chronologically

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[1] Full publication details of the texts used will be given in the relevant chapters.

[2] Ian Hamilton, Interview with Dan Jacobson, *New Review*, IV (October 1977), 25.

[3] Michael Wade's article, "Apollo, Dionysus and other Performers in Dan Jacobson's South African Circus" is the most comprehensive discussion of Jacobson's novels to date, but refers only briefly to the first two of the later novels. In *World Literature in English*, XIII (April 1974), 39-82.

with Jacobson's novels, which are grouped in terms of significant stages in his development; for convenience sake his first five novels will at times be referred to as his 'South African novels,' the three after *The Beginners* as 'the later novels.'

CHAPTER I. BACKGROUND

Until the fairly recent articulation of Marxist approaches to literature in this country, criticism of South African English fiction had as its unquestioned base certain liberal-humanist assumptions which require explication if one is to perceive Jacobson's particular divergence within a general set of expectations. The relatively unformed and unexamined nature of South African society and its emerging literature has meant that any discussion of fiction inevitably involves social observation, and the opinions cited below are representative of the consistent body of thought thus produced over the last three decades.

In the early 1950s when Jacobson began writing, the critical climate of expectation was impatiently optimistic. R.K. Cope says that with the evaporation of the illusions, like that of Imperialist glamour, which had given rise to the sentimental novels of the past, young English-speaking writers "stand in a more tense relationship to the truth than at any time in the past." Consequently he expects of them a literature of distinction and artistic merit.[1] Anthony Delius comments that English life in South Africa has reached the same state of spiritual ferment as Afrikaans life twenty years previously,[2] and Joseph Sachs says: "While the older writers took refuge in a social fatalism or religious fanaticism, the younger have a more open mind - and a more open heart. They too are aware of the blight on the land and the still greater blight on three-fourths of the people;

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[1] "Prospects for South African English Prose," *Trek*, XV (March 1950), 8-9.

[2] "The Exile and the Aboriginal," *Standpunte*, VII (June 1953), 89.

but they believe in progress and human betterment."[3] Neither Jacobson nor Nadine Gordimer, the best-known white English novelists to emerge in the fifties, had published their first novels, but the issues raised by these critics were to be crucial to their work: Cope's point that the racial situation presents the writer with the unavoidable task of interpreting what amounts to a drama of world conscience; Sachs' point that the landscape in South African stories both reflects the boredom and isolation of the white man in Africa and acts as a stifler of effort and initiative, even of moral conscience; and Delius', that the South African writer experiences tension between a yearning for common humanity, which forces his attention onto his own society, and a yearning for civilized sophistication which his country cannot provide. Reviewing recent books at the time, Delius himself demonstrates this tension by both praising these novelists who confront the racial issue, and greeting with relief one who does not.

The work of novelists like Sarah Gertrude Millin, William Plomer and Alan Paton had already indicated that the English writer's role in South Africa was to be that of enlightened critic of oppressive racial conditions. Increasingly it came to be seen as another social function of literature to provide South African society, raw still and heterogeneous, with that sense of its own reality which it lacked. Gordimer expresses this view in her essay, "The Novel and the Nation in South Africa" (1961):

> ... In South Africa, in Africa generally, the reader knows perilously little about himself or his feelings. We have a great deal to learn about ourselves, and the novelist, along with the poet, playwright, composer and painter, must teach us. We look to them to give us the background of self-knowledge that we may be able to take for granted.[4]

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[3] "The Short Stories of Gordimer, Lessing and Bosman," *Trek*, XV (November 1951), 16.

[4] *TLS*, 11 August 1961, p. 521.

In all her novels, including *A Guest of Honour* (1971) which is not set in South Africa, Gordimer constructs a detailed psychological and physical background to her society's behaviour. One of those who has praised her effort and echoed her sentiments is Nat Nakasa, who says of her novel *A World of Strangers* (1958):

> ...[it] may very well be part of the beginning of a vital mutual recognition of the reality of our time in South Africa; that although conflict exists on many levels between black and white, we are a single community with a common identity and, therefore, requiring common ideals, moral values, and common national aspirations.[5]

This was said, ironically, two years before his suicide in exile. The extreme divisiveness of our society, its lack of common aspirations, was in fact the literature's almost inevitable topic, and liberal realism its mode into the 1970s: Raymond Sands likens local writers to the 'Condition of England' group of the 19th century which included Dickens, George Eliot and Disraeli: exponents of the realist novel who sought through this mode to give expression to the changing nature of society and its problems.[6] Restrictions in terms of subject choice and related mode of presentation arising from 'the reality of our time' in South Africa became increasingly irksome to both Jacobson and Gordimer. Certainly the following comment shows a frustration not apparent in her earlier comment:

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[5] "Writing in South Africa," *The Classic*, I (1963), 62.

[6] "The South African Novel: Some Observations," *English Studies in Africa*, XIII (March 1970), 100.

> ... All writers everywhere ... are shaped by their own particular society reflecting a particular political situation. Yet there is no country in the western world where the daily enactment of the law reflects politics as intimately and blatantly as in South Africa. There is no country in the western world where the creative imagination, whatever it seizes upon, finds the focus of even the most private event set in the overall social determination of racial laws.[7]

Awareness of the racial situation dominates critical expectations as well. David Rabkin, speaking of the awareness of colour as the dominant imaginative process at work in the novels of Millin and Plomer comments:

> ... The segregated imagination will become an anachronism, some time in the South African future. For the white South African novelist writing in English it has, since the twenties, been an unavoidable path. For the critic the criterion has therefore been similarly predetermined. How honestly has the writer charted the path? How far has he been able to see beyond it?[8]

Arthur Ravenscroft points out that not only is the scope of the writer's material limited by the situation facing him, but that his knowledge of this material is also by definition restricted:

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[7] "English Language Literature and Politics in South Africa" in *Aspects of South African Literature*, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann and New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1976), p. 100.

[8] "Race and Fiction: *God's Stepchildren* and *Turbott Wolfe*" in *The South African Novel in English*, ed. Kenneth Parker (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 94.

> ... Knowing the faces and minds of South Africans must always be a central creative problem for South African writers, in whatever language. That the best writers in English, both white and black, have attempted it again and again, if not always with full success, is a measure of the seriousness with which they take the writer's craft and its social responsibilities. ...[9]

The emphasis in all these statements is on the writer's social responsibility, the assumption being that his central interest will be his society's most urgent problems, and that this interest will be informed by concern and compassion. These are essentially liberal assumptions, embodied in Paton's summary of his historical sketch of South Africa in an article entitled "Why I write" (1949):

> When one surveys this history, and the country in which the history was made, one is filled with a compassion for all the races that have been caught up and involved in this situation that is apparently without solutions. One feels compassion for those who struggle to hold what they have, and those that struggle to get more than they have; one feels compassion for those who are caught in the vice of these opposing struggles, many of whom do not understand the nature of the thing in which they are caught; one feels compassion for those who desire above all else to live lives of peace and ordinariness, who want to leave some kind of future for their children; and all this compassion is caught up and made one in an immense compassion for something that is greater than them all, namely the vast and beautiful country that suffers it all.[10]

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[9] "South African English Literature," in *English-Speaking South Africa Today: Proceedings of the National Conference July 1974*, ed. Andre de Villiers (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 324.

[10] In *Knocking on the Door*, ed. Colin Gardner (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975), p. 78.

While Paton's compassionate protest in *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948) is paternalistic, the kind of patriotism which he expresses in the above passage, and his implicit vision of a better society in which peace and ordinariness have a place, remain relevant to a consideration of South African literature as social criticism. For a novel to be convincingly critical its writer must be concerned about the society in question and serious about his own part in it, so that he has both a reason and a right to be concerned; it requires too his belief in an alternative social dispensation as the norm against which the existing one is criticized. These features, relatively weak in Jacobson's novels, are assumed as links between the novelists of a tradition in which he is repeatedly, implicitly or explicitly, included. Kenneth Parker is one critic who invokes it:

> The tradition which begins with Schreiner I shall call 'liberal - concerned'. Its chief characteristics appear to be marked creative sensibility allied to and informed by a deep compassion. Spanning the past century, it cuts across colour lines and class origins and coincides in literary terms with that period in political development when white rule consolidates itself, but where some members of the dominant group as well as writers from the dominated group articulate demands for the amelioration of discriminatory practices. ... [11]

Parker's emphasis on specific political developments is instructive. In the decades following the Nationalist takeover of 1948, English-speakers' protests against discrimination had an added edge in being directed against the Afrikaner enforcement of apartheid. The English felt themselves to be

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[11] Title essay in *The South African Novel in English*, p. 7.

a politically powerless minority, less secure in their sense of belonging in this country than the Afrikaners: their concern for the oppressed blacks became an aspect of their opposition to the government, and of their anxiety about their own identity. A quasi-mythical 'quest for identity' thus emerges in the criticism, allied to the ideal of a better community in which if, primarily, the blacks would no longer be dominated by the Afrikaner, then neither would the English.

Literature is again seen as the vehicle for this concern about social identity. Addressing the English Academy Conference in 1969, I.D. MacCrone made this claim:

> ... it is to our South African writers in English, to our teachers and students of English and to our intellectuals in general, that we must turn for the contributions that they alone can make on our behalf as a group, to our English-speaking South African way of life and culture. For it is they who in the last resort can render articulate for us in our characteristic South African idioms, the way in which we think and feel as English-speaking South Africans. And it is mainly through them that we shall be able to continue to make our idiosyncratic contribution to the future development of the culture of our country.[12]

Guy Butler on the same occasion voiced a plea for South African literature to be prescribed at school level:

> ... Does not the child need, indeed, has he not the right to find his own environment, his own landscape and history, in some of his reading? If he does not, will he not be

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[12] Opening Address to the English Academy of Southern Africa, *English Studies in Africa*, XIII (March 1970), 9.

> encouraged to believe (as some would like him to believe) that his language, and therefore his people, are alien, do not belong in Africa? Is this not particularly true in a country where the other official language speaks with increasing vigour and depth to his South African condition?[13]

At a later conference at which prominent English-speakers again gathered to consider themselves, Butler's statements had a stronger sense of urgency:

> ... identity is surely not a matter of approximating to a stereotype; it is quite as much a matter of conscience, of being able to live with oneself, of knowing where one stands. We are not, as a people, looking for a folk hero or an ideal English-speaker to model ourselves upon: we are rather looking for a map of the territory through which we are moving haphazardly, and with mounting unease.[14]

This unease is reflected by the editors of two of the few anthologies of critical essays on South African fiction. Christopher Heywood speaks in his Introduction to *Aspects of South African Literature* of "the obsessive pursuit of identity by South African writers" which "reflects their insecurity in a maze of contradictory loyalties";[15] and Parker introduces *The South African Novel in English* with the comment:

> ... it would seem that the uncertainties of ... the novelist ... reflect the confusion of the peoples of South Africa, where law, custom and habit combine to prevent individuals and groups from discovering themselves. It is one of the great merits of

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[13] "The Purpose of the Conference," ibid., p. 13.

[14] "The Nature and Purpose of the Conference," in *English-Speaking South Africa Today*, p. 11.

[15] "Introduction: The Quest for Identity," p. viii.

> the novels discussed in this book that, if their authors have done nothing else, they have tried to show how this desire for self-discovery proceeds in the face of massive obstacles.[16]

Social responsibility is seen as meritorious. But the notion of a desire for self-discovery has inherent dangers. It can in itself constitute a group's identity, obviating real self-confrontation in which English-speaking South Africans would see themselves as oppressors alongside Afrikaners: the liberal conscience thus operates as "a mechanism of dissociation."[17] A social scientist's analysis is that in fact English-speaking South Africans are major beneficiaries of the privilege available in an oppressive society, with little incentive to bring about change within it except their anxiety to remain identified with Western liberal values.[18] The point is developed by Mike Kirkwood, who argues that the English South African culture theory has functioned as a salve to this group's hurt pride at its political defeat and as a way of gifting to the triumphant Afrikaner the guilt in which the English in fact share.[19] It is moreover a simplification to see Afrikaners as culturally at ease, and ignores the anxiety with which N.P. van Wyk Louw as early as the 1930s and D.J. Opperman in 1960, warned of the "cold spiritual hell" that the Afrikaner would create around his isolation.[20] But the more pertinent danger, from the point of view of this thesis, lies in the literary

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16 Preface to *The South African Novel in English*, pp. xii-xiii.

17 Jack Cope, "Comment - the Liberal Conscience," *Contrast*, I (Winter 1961), 7.

18 Lawrence Schlemmer, "English-Speaking South Africans today: Identity and Integration into the Broader National Community," in *English-Speaking South Africa Today*, p. 97.

19 "The Colonizer: a critique of the English South African culture Theory," in *Poetry South Africa*, eds. Peter Wilhelm and James A. Polley (Johannesburg: A.D. Donker, 1976), pp. 102-133.

20 Adam Small, "Literature, Community and South Africa," *New Classic*, no.2 (197[illegible]), pp. 1-6.

expectations to which the English liberal pursuit of identity gives rise. What Gordimer has called the "extraordinary and terrifying intimacy"[21] between reader and writer in South Africa can mean that the writer's contribution to our accumulated social knowledge dominates discussion of his work. Thus one finds Olive Schreiner hailed as the first writer to take the Karoo seriously, Pauline Smith for treating the rural Afrikaner with sympathy, Plomer for first radically questioning sexual segregation, Paton for proselytizing liberal sentiment - and Jacobson for speaking out in what critics are agreed is a liberal and compassionate voice, against the inhumanities of our system.

An initial reading of Jacobson's short stories and of his five South African novels confirms this reputation; he fits easily into the framework of *angst* which emerges from English, and especially since the Sestiger movement, Afrikaans fiction in this country. Socio-political protest does occur in Jacobson's South African novels and is basic to the structure of *The Trap*, *A Dance in the Sun* and *The Evidence of Love*. But one senses a certain strain in his protest; in *A Dance in the Sun* and *The Price of Diamonds* passages can be isolated in which critical statements intrude into the narration as though arising from the writer's compulsion to clarify his liberal position, while *The Evidence of Love* as a whole is an attempt to do just that. In a writer with Jacobson's reputation for tonal control the strain of these efforts suggests that his compulsion is not really integral to his purpose. Another source of unease for the reader is that the view of human life which emerges from his novels as a

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[21] "The Novel and the Nation in South Africa," p. 521.

whole is essentially at variance with the liberal view of man, so that what is stated seems not quite to correspond to what is shown. Jacobson does explore the problem of identity in society, but with the emphasis on the individual's fixed limitations, manifested in terms of the lowest common denominator of human experience: betrayal, humiliation, self-contempt. No escape into identification in terms of a greater whole is available, his characters cannot achieve self-transcendence through social concern or political activity. And if everyone can only be what they are, social amelioration is by implication impossible.

In his interview with Ian Hamilton (1977), Jacobson speaks of "the creation of new, whole fantasy experiences"[22] as the purpose of fiction, a view which contrasts sharply with the idea underlying South African literary theory of the writer as mediator of social conscience. He appears to have been impatient with this idea from early on in his career, as Paton's reply during a 1956 address to an unspecified remark of Jacobson's, suggests:

> ... I understand what Dan Jacobson means when he says he looks forward to the day when one need not write about race. ... I do not think that Mr Jacobson need apologise for writing about it. Race is not a plot, or a structural pattern, or an obsession; it is the very stuff of our lives, and it is life that is the making of a story. ... [23]

Other critics (e.g. Parker, Ravenscroft, Rabkin, Cronin) tend like Paton to maintain the racial issue as the South African writer's worthiest

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[22] Hamilton, p. 26.

[23] "The South African Novel in English" in *Knocking on the Door*, p. 140.

topic even when acknowledging that tension can exist between his social responsibility and his individual freedom. Gordimer's warning against the "orthodoxy of opposition"[24] thus created is preceded by some twenty years by Jacobson's exasperated plea in the first critical article of his to be published, "The Story of an African Farm: An Approach" (1953):

> ... At the moment we are being bombarded by books about race relations. With a very few exceptions, these books, written though they may be by people with the most generous sentiments, are worth very little. They are written about race relations and not about people. Now Olive Schreiner, in this book at any rate, did not write about race relations, partly because she lived in a time less desperately self-conscious about these things than our own, and partly because, when she was a good writer, she did not think in these terms ...
>
> ... she writes about South Africa as if she herself were living in London and writing about London. It is there, before her, and she writes about it ... there is no awareness that to be a writer in South Africa is a very difficult matter; she writes naturally and spontaneously about South Africa: she ignores the problems and writes about people. And on paper it is the problems that are easy to deal with, writing about people is far more demanding.

He concludes: "If there is a lesson to South African writers in her book, it is that they should think less about being South Africans, and more about being writers."[25]

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[24] "A Writer's Freedom," *New Classic*, no. 2. (1975) p. 12.

[25] *Standpunte*, VIII (September 1953), 71-73.

Nonetheless, 'being South African' exerted its pressures on him. The nature of the social conditions in which he grew up gave rise to similar expectations in him as those outlined in the previous pages. In retrospect he says:

> ... I do now feel that when I was writing about South Africa I was responding to certain quasi-moral obligations, external to me, which I could not avoid ...
>
> ... Most of what I was writing about seemed to me never to have been described at all. Therefore I felt that I couldn't take chances with it. I actually had to say what it was like ... That was one obligation. Another was that I had grown up within the South African situation, conscious of it as one of great moral turbulence and difficulty, and I felt that I had somehow to find a way of expressing what seemed to me the right attitudes towards it. ...[26]

The extent to which 'saying the right moral thing' was an obligation to him is clear from what he goes on to say about his reaction on finding, after *The Beginners*, that he could no longer write about South Africa:

> ... when I found that I no longer wished to write about South Africa, or rather that I *could* no longer write about South Africa, one of the reasons I felt liberated was that I was no longer working under external obligations of any kind ...
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> ... It is ironic - I find it disturbing really - that in writing *The Rape of Tamar* [his first novel after *The Beginners*] I was conscious of a feeling of exhilaration - which was in part generated by adopting the voice of a thoroughly unscrupulous type. [27]

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[26] Hamilton, p. 26.

[27] loc. cit.

What other older generation South African writer could have said that? Even amongst his fellow exiles - C.J. Driver, Peter Abrahams, Ezekiel Mphahlele till a few years ago, ex-Rhodesian Doris Lessing - none sought a liberation from their home situation so complete as to reverse the moral voice it had required. Jacobson's reaction makes more sense if one considers all he has said about his background as South African and Jew, from which his scepticism emerges about a given social identity ever providing the individual with a comforting sense of belonging, or of moral purpose. And if an individual's relationship to his physical environment is a gauge of his 'belonging' to the society it sustains, then Jacobson's reaction to landscape as expressed in his autobiographical writing emphasizes his alienation from the society in which he found himself. This is the recurrent experience of his characters.

Jacobson's father was a Lithuanian Jew who had immigrated to South Africa in 1905, and tried such diverse occupations as pedlar and farmer before buying a bankrupt butter factory in Kimberley. The town was then in a depressed state following a slump in the diamond industry, and Jacobson himself, born in 1929, was four years old.[28] His arrival in Kimberley marks the point at which his memories become coherent; indeed the impression that Kimberley made on him as a child has remained very powerfully with him. He says after a return visit:

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[28] Information for this section was found in Jacobson's autobiographical articles cited below. For further details I am indebted to the writer for comments during private conversation, June 1980.

> ... I know there is a part of myself which resists the changes in recent years that have made Kimberley so much more commonplace and conventional, by South African standards, than it used to be; which still likes to think of it as an isolated, ironic monument to the hysterias of the past, a symbol of defunct imperialism and an exhausted money-greed, in the middle of the silence and indifference of the veld.
>
> The contrast between the feverishness of the past and the stillness of the present; between the self-assertion of so many of the town's buildings and imperial monuments and the vacancy of earth and sky around them; between the energy and ambition which had dug the holes of the mines ... and the air of complete abandonment and uselessness they had when I first saw them; between supposed wealth and evident forlornness, fame and drabness - all these contrasts made a profoundly ironic impression on me as a child. It was impossible to avoid developing a sense of the tenuousness of the human settlement around me, of its dislocation, of the fortuituos-ness of its birth, early growth and sudden decline. Doubtless the particular nature of my response was partly shaped by the fact that my parents had not been born in South Africa, but had come to it from another world: that of the small Jewish *shtetl* thousands of miles away in Eastern Europe. But if we were therefore half-alien to this scatter of buildings thrown down apparently at random on the veld, so was almost everyone else: alien to it and to each other.[29]

If hindsight can be trusted one has in this perception the first vivid form of what becomes a motif in Jacobson's writing: the contrast between

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[29] "A Last Word on Kimberley" *Listener*, 30 November 1972, pp. 733-34.

human enterprise and an overarching indifferent reality, such that the former appears absurd. The contrast between Kimberley's imperial pretensions and its meagre realities is one of the many contrasts which intersect in his childhood experience and contribute towards his sense of cultural unease in South Africa: as though he cannot identify fully with a situation itself composed of ambiguities.

One such ambiguity is fairly typical. Like many English-speaking South Africans, Jacobson grew up reading children's books which reinforced a different cultural background to his own: *Alice in Wonderland, Treasure Island, William* and *Biggles* books, and given his strong literary bent the books came to assume an imaginative authority over him beyond their fantasy appeal. England, the country which they explored with so much assurance and detail, became in a sense more real to him than his own. The very 'undocumented' nature of his country which it was later an obligation on him to attempt to remedy, acted as a dissociating factor in his childhood. In his contribution to a symposium entitled *Alienation* (1960) this is a point on which he elaborates:

> ... The veld, the sun, the heat, the black people of the town, even the Afrikaans-speaking whites, my own position as the son of an immigrant Jewish family - these were all unwritten about, without confirmation, without background, without credentials. There was something unreliable, not to say fishy, about them all. We did not live as people should live; we did not live where people should live. It was wrong that summer should have come in December and winter in July; it was wrong that I never saw snow, wrong that our servants were black men and women who could not speak English instead of apple-cheeked wenches and impertinent Cockneys; wrong that we had no "countryside"

> around the town, only veld; wrong that we had no dells, no streams, no fogs, no thatched cottages, no lords, no ladies, no villages (we had *dorps*, but a *dorp* was not a village); our clothes, our houses, our trees were all wrong.[30]

Jacobson's fascination for England was reinforced by an incongruously jingoist headmaster who recreated English tradition at the school which he attended, and by the fact that as a child during World War II he was aware of England as a major power in two international issues which reached into his private life: on the one hand England opposed Hitler and on the other obstructed the Zionist struggle in Palestine. His home country, Jacobson came to realize, was not where decisions of world interest were made, nor was it where his imaginative interests were centred; it could not be reconciled with the land of his parents' childhood, just as intimacy built up with black servants could not be reconciled with the inevitable separation of their lives from his. The pity, guilt and impotence of the young 'liberal' - his championing of the underdog which could itself have derived partly from the English literary tradition - also had its alienating effect.

The nature of this early liberalism requires some attention. The acquisition of racial awareness is described in *A Dance in the Sun* and *The Evidence of Love*, with scepticism as to the value of the activities to which it can lead. Jacobson's first two short stories to be published, "The Box" and "A Day in the Country" (1953)[31] explore the insensitivities

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[30] "Settling in England," *Commentary*, XXIX (January 1960), 24.

[31] In *Through the Wilderness: Selected Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 1-8 and 9-17.

of the racial situation; they are based on incidents in his childhood and are presented by a first-person narrator in a bland voice of reminiscence which offsets the ironic conclusion towards which many of the stories work. The South African situation lends itself to ironic juxtapositioning of its elements and resists satisfying conclusions, and the short story, which can find in the very juxtaposition its conclusion, has been a much-used form in this country's literature. The novel necessitates a writer's further exploration of his chosen situation and indicates whether, and what,he can see beyond its obvious ironies: the judgement in this thesis of the limitations of Jacobson's social concern has for this reason been based on his novels. But even in a short story like "Beggar My Neighbour" (1962)[32] (not narrated in the first person), Michael's 'liberal awakening' is not convincing. The story concerns a white boy who develops a patronizing relationship with two black children. Initially he enjoys giving them food and old clothes, but their persistence gradually makes him despise and dread them. Certain of the writer's preoccupations are explored: the fantasies of power to which isolation gives rise, the desire to humiliate those over whom one has power, the way in which fantasies can reshape reality. Michael's fantasies lead first to cruelty, then to apparent good when in a feverish dream he realizes the mutual hate that exists between him and the black children and takes them into his house, touching and kissing and thereby releasing himself from them. The rather sentimental ending has the kind of balance for which Jacobson often strives - hate is replaced by love, where Michael could earlier not get rid of the children he now cannot find them - but its meaning is not clear. Michael in fact does nothing, so why

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[32] In *Through the Wilderness*, pp. 58-69.

do the children disappear? His recognition of them as people rather than objects of cruelty occurs only in a dream, which allows for the vagueness of the emotional transition, while the gesture of kissing, apart from being itself a form of paternalistic bestowal, is too obviously symbolic to be convincing. Given the 'extraordinary intimacy' between writer and subject in South Africa, it is perhaps not unfair to suggest that the story fails, as does *The Evidence of Love* because the writer is not convinced, or does not himself know enough, about the breakdown of racial barriers.

In this context it should be noted that Jacobson was never politically active in South Africa partly because he defines the social barriers in this country as too immense to admit of any solution in which he could believe. Through his novels another reason suggests itself which reaches beyond these specific barriers to his view of human life: namely that socially concerned activity is always self-conscious, self-justifactory and thus lacking in altruistic or political significance. This applies to most of Jacobson's characters, from Michael's need to see himself as a king handing out good things, to Absalom's vision of himself as a progressive prince in *The Rape of Tamar*.

In considering Jacobson's sense of dissociation from the South African situation, the fact that he is a Jew is of obvious significance. "To be a Jew" he says à propos of Kafka, "is certainly to know social unease, under the best conditions".[33] But too easy an equation between Jewishness and alienation is refuted by the commitment which other Jewish writers, notably Gordimer, have made to South Africa, and refuted also in Jacobson's own family. His immigrant father, in whom a sense of rootlessness would be

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[33] "Franz Kafka: A Voice from the Burrow" (1960) in *Time of Arrival and other essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), p. 184.

understandable, was not only a passionate Zionist but a passionate South African patriot who could never understand why his son wanted to leave this country. Counting against the equation is also Jacobson's apparent lack of a very strong feeling about what it means to be Jewish. He writes a great deal about it, but then he is preoccupied in all his writing and especially in his novels with his own past, the facets of his own experience. (He tends, he says, to be backward-looking, and this tendency emerges very strongly from a consideration of his novels as a whole). An anti-semitic incident described in the early short story "A Day in the Country", indicates his perception of complex racial tension in South Africa rather than his specific sense of persecution; and although *The Beginners* deals extensively with a Jewish family, the decisions about 'belonging' which its members face are merely typical of those faced by every other character in the book, and do not point to the specifically alienating nature of being Jewish.

Rather than concentrating on what it means to be Jewish, Jacobson subtly dissociates himself from this aspect of his social identity, as from its South African aspect. He never believed in the Judaic God and only briefly in Zionism; he tried to settle in Israel before going to England but could not. In England he noted that the Anglo-Jewish audience was one that sought through its literature "... to be confronted: it wants to be continually assured that its ways are just, its habits good, its impulses generous, its traditions ennobling and fully alive, its institutions worthy of reverence."[34]

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[34] "Jewish Writing in England," *Commentary*, XXXVII (May 1964), 46.

Rather than fulfilling these functions, a 'Jewish work' was to Jacobson simply one about Jews by a Jewish writer: the *group* identity is played down. Nor did he uphold the role of the Jewish community in South Africa as a social conscience. South African Jews have been described as facing a dilemma, pulled one way by their traditionally liberal political thought and conscience towards oppressed peoples, and the other by the realities of their financial and political position.[35] Reviewing a history of South African Jewry, Jacobson confirms that a section of the Jewish community are identifying their interests with those of the government. He argues that Jews cannot, simply by virtue of their own history of racial suffering, grow up free of the racial prejudice around them, and far from bewailing this expresses his sympathy with South African Jews when "their irritation is aroused by people who tell them that because they are Jews it is their duty to 'throw their lot' with the Natives, and to 'stand by the victims of oppression' and the various other things that outsiders so readily advise them to do."[36] To Ronald Segal's impassioned reply that if Jews cease to work actively against oppression they are abdicating their moral place in history, Jacobson asserts - and he is clearly on the defensive despite saying that he is not apologizing - that what he has described are the facts of the situation, that individual dignity does not only lie in the martyrdom that faces whites who 'throw in their lot' with blacks, and that moral claims made on the Jews as a group ignore "the frailty and intractability of human beings." To Segal's criticism

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[35] E. Feit, "Community in a Quandary: The South African Jewish Community and 'Apartheid'," *Race*, VIII (April 1967), 396.

[36] "The Jews of South Africa: Portrait of a Flourishing Community," *Commentary*, XXIII (January 1957), 44.

he admits that his is an outsider's view, and certainly the social concern beneath Segal's emotionalism is lacking in Jacobson. Calling himself a liberal, he nonetheless attacks Segal as one of those liberals who believe "that anyone who has pretensions to being literate or educated or sensitive must automatically hold the same attitudes as themselves, and share their indignations and moral fervours."[37] But despite his denial of the moral imperative to action which has dogged South African liberalism, a liberal-humanist point about the freedom of individual choice for people of any race as regards their social involvement, is still being made. Jacobson's novels, which echo his snideness about liberalism above, go further in exposing the limitations of his social concern and counterbalance the vaguely humanist note of much of his journalism. For in his novels opposition to moral-social roles comes from the writer's cynicism about their value rather than from his vision of individual freedom.

The claims made about Jacobson as a Jewish writer reinforce those made about him as a South African. Both arise from groups which are for very different reasons defensive about their national identity and hungry for self-explication. Lionel Abrahams in South Africa, and Renee Winegarten and Michael Wade further afield have expressed their pleasure at the Jewish character of much of his writing.[38] They do seem thereby to mistake his preoccupation with his own experience and identity for concern about the group to which he belongs, or to emphasize its outward rather than its inward focus - leading to disappointment for Wade when after *The Beginners* the writer abstracts his preoccupations rather than continuing a realist

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[37] "Apartheid and South African Jewry: An Exchange," *Commentary*, XXIV (November 1957), 428 & 31.

[38] Abrahams, Book Reviews, *Africa South*, III (April-June 1949), 128; Winegarten, "The Novels of Dan Jacobson," *Midstream* (May 1966), p. 69.

exploration of his Jewish experience.[39] Jacobson's uneasiness about being claimed in this way is clear from an interview fairly early on in his career (1959), when an Israeli interviewer asked him: "It's probably no secret to you that English-speaking Jews are quite pleased about your choice of Jewish life as one of your main centres of interest. To what extent do you see yourself as a Jewish writer?" Jacobson's reply:

> I suppose I'm a Jewish writer insofar as I'm a Jew. To what extent that is so, I don't really know: it varies with circumstances, depending on what I'm writing ...
>
> ... the problem of being a South African writer is easier to deal with since other people have had to deal with it and the precedents are more easily available to someone writing in English ... The crux of the matter as far as I am concerned is being a South African writer but not living there - being an exile. There's nothing you can do in that position but to find your material in it. The situation links up pretty closely with the business of being a Jewish writer.[40]

'I suppose I'm a Jewish writer insofar as I'm a Jew': his reluctance echoes the earlier article on Schreiner in which he was in effect saying: 'I'm a South African writer only insofar as I'm a South African.' In other words, he resists having to live up to the expectations of either aspect of his social identity. His reply suggests that his own interest lies in his condition of exile: his alienation or lack of social identity, made permanent.

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[39] "Apollo, Dionysus and other Performers in Dan Jacobson's South African Circus," pp. 79-82.

[40] Meir Mindlin, A Talk with Dan Jacobson, *Jewish Affairs*, XIV (August 1959), 22 Another article on p. 30 of the same issue is entitled: "Where are our South African Jewish Authors?"

Given this background, Jacobson's immigration to England can be seen as the expression rather than the cause of the sense of alienation which pervades his novels, the step which makes it his choice rather than his failure. After his parallel break with South Africa in his fiction the later three novels are concerned with reversing his own past, and it is interesting to note that his immigration does this in a very specific way. Jacobson's father had made two commitments requiring national and geographical identification: he bought a farm in the Karoo,which even to many South Africans is alien territory, and he was an adherent of the Revisionist Zionism of Ze'ev Jabotinsky who broke with Weizmann precisely in order to restore to Zionism its essentially political nature and to fight more insistently for land and self-government for the Jews. Jacobson must have grown up with a strong impression of the important relationship between a people and a specific geographical area, and as a journalist has written about this in connection with both Afrikaners and Jews. But the national character thus implied he shuns for himself: even in his non-South African novels landscape is inimical to the individual and acts as a symbol of his isolation.

Jacobson lived in England for a year in 1950/1, returned to South Africa for four years and finally in 1954 immigrated to England where he became a freelance writer and journalist. He had already published a number of short stories and completed his first novel *The Trap* . He has said that when he decided to live in England he felt that his writing would simply have to take care of itself, but also that he knew he would have to leave South Africa if he was to become a writer at all.[41] He gives a generalized

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[41] Hamilton p. 28 and private conversation.

account of the literary reasons for immigrating to England in a talk in 1962 on the intellectual conditions governing literary activity within the English-speaking countries of the Commonwealth,[42] listing five such conditions: *the absence of a local literature*, the 'doubleness' that results from growing up reading books which do not interpret one's own world; *the absence of a national intellectual tradition*, where even the best intellectual life is haphazard, irritating rather than stimulating; *the absence of established and highly-developed social forms* or social tenuousness which in South Africa is reflected in the imaginative flatness of the country's streets, buildings and accents; *the absence of a local audience* which means that the writer has to look overseas for a critical reading public; and arising from these the final *condition of exile* when the writer gravitates towards the cultural metropolis where these lacks will be supplied, but where he knows he will always occupy a peripheral position.

These are exclusively cultural needs which, for Jacobson, England met. Simply the variety of windows in London overwhelmed him with wonder at the "richness and diversity of life that had achieved its embodiment in England"[43] though in *The Wonder-Worker* this setting is also, like the South African landscape, depicted as repellent to human life. Even at the time of his immigration his positive feelings about his new environment did not make him want to 'belong' there; on the contrary, he describes in an earlier article his gratitude towards England for its "indifference," his "relief" at being an outsider to a society which exists independent of

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[42] Republished as "The Writer in the Commonwealth" in *Time of Arrival*, pp. 157-65.

[43] "Time of Arrival" (1960/1) in *Time of Arrival*, p. 37.

any imaginative or compassionate effort on his part.[44] His relief is quite obviously not so much at the absence of social injustice in England after South Africa, but at his freedom from the necessity to be concerned about it. A cultural rather than a political step has been taken, and the word *emigré* is perhaps more appropriate to Jacobson's resulting position than the politically loaded word 'exile'.

In a series of rhetorical questions at the end of the Commonwealth article, Jacobson asks whether a writer who takes a relatively new society as his material is very different from other writers, if all are engaged in describing people and countries as they have never been described before. In doing so he both plays down his own sense of obligation as a writer from such a society, and generalizes his lack of direct contact with his locality, and the persistence of it in his work. This suggests some anxiety about what he is doing as a writer, and it is significant that the article was written between the publication of *The Evidence of Love* where he focuses most dramatically on South Africa and returns his characters to this country, and *The Beginners* where his focus shifts away from South Africa, and numerous characters enact his own decision to leave.

His five novels up to and including *The Beginners* can be seen as a series of attempts to shape his South African material. Kimberley recurs as 'Lyndhurst' and the experiences of being Jewish, South African, and alienated, are explored in various ways. He experiments with forms - Jewish comedy (*The Price of Diamonds*), a protest novel (*The Evidence of Love*), a family saga (*The Beginners*) - and the authorial voice changes accordingly: detached in *The Trap*, earnest in *A Dance in the Sun*, ironic then melodramatic

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44 "Settling in England," pp. 27-28.

in the following two novels. Jacobson's half-unwilling obligation to his South African material would have been reinforced by the revival of realism in the British novel which began during the 1950s and by his admiration at the time for the 'moral realism' of such critics as Lionel Trilling and F.R. Leavis.[45] Its persistence can be gauged in relation to other Southern African novelists in exile: Mphahlele wrote a realist novel *Chirundu* (1979) about the country in which for a while he made his new home; Driver in *Death of Fathers* (1972) and *A Messiah of the Last Days* (1974) and Lessing in *The Four-Gated City* (1969) *The Golden Notebook*, (1962) and *Summer before the Dark* (1973) wrote as though they had assimilated an English character. Presumably this is not something that Jacobson wanted, given his relief at his 'peripheral' position in England; his writing registers his immigration not, as in the writers mentioned, by a change in geographical identification but by a gradual disconnection from South Africa and loss of realist locality.

But if he experiments in his novels, the voice of his journalism is far more consistent: that of sane, rather old-fashioned humanism which protests any cheapening of human life and allows itself some snideness about, for example, the 'Beat' generation.[46] He has written a number of articles about South Africa after his visits to this country; one is marred by the ringing phrases to which the subject lends itself and to which Jacobson's earlier journalism is prone ("To deny full humanity to others is to attempt to deny it - in all its strengths and weaknesses - to oneself. Proudly, boastfully,

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[45] See, e.g., "Scrutiny in Retrospect," *New Statesman*, 25 October 1963, pp.567-68 and "Beyond Whose Culture?." *Commentary*, XXXXI (March 1966), 87-92.

[46] See, e.g., "America's 'Angry Young Men': How Rebellious are the San Francisco Rebels?," *Commentary*, XXIV (December 1957), 475-79; "Sociology Homework," *Encounter*, XIII (September 1959), 75-78 and "Crazy Young Allies," *Spectator*, (24 March 1961), 407-8.

the attempt is being made in South Africa, as it has been made a thousand times before in a thousand different places; miserably, squalidly, painfully, it is going to fail, as it has always failed before.")[47] Later articles on South Africa contain whimsical human insights, but politically they are all descriptive rather than analytical, and intended for overseas readership.[48] The papers of the Africa-Scandinavian Writers' Conference in 1967 illustrate Jacobson's basically non-political bent: here, while Wole Soyinka, Alex la Guma, Dennis Brutus and others did battle on the relationship between politics and creativity in Africa, Jacobson delivered a neat, oddly distanced account of childhood in Kimberley.[49]

The attempt to escape a given identity is the motif linking Jacobson's novels and seems to have its base in his own experience. In all the individual human experiences which he explores this is the common factor, in terms of which his later three novels, though in distinct contrast to the earlier five, can also be seen to constitute an abstraction and intensification of earlier perceptions. In concentrating on the internal consistency or lack thereof in Jacobson's novels, and on their consistency as a whole, certain surprising developments in his work become explicable, and objections are raised to those critical opinions which appear to have taken it too much at face value. In the chronological discussion of his novels which

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47 "South Africa: Explanations and Speculations," (1960) in *Time of Arrival*, p.97.

48 See, e.g., The Atlantic Report: South Africa," *Atlantic Monthly* CCV (June, 1960 14-21; "The Isolation of South Africa," *Atlantic Monthly*, CCVII (June 1961), 58-61; "Among the South Africans," *Commentary*, LXV (March 1978), 32-48; "On the Eve of Something in South Africa," *LRB*, 19 June - 2 July 1980, pp. 22-23.

49 "Boyhood in Kimberley" in *The Writer in Modern Africa*, ed. Per Wastberg (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968), pp. 85-91.

follows the relationship between Jacobson's perception of individual experience and the exigencies of his South African material will be traced, and an interpretation of his development as a writer suggested.

CHAPTER II: SOCIO-POLITICAL ALLEGORIES

Jacobson has said of South African society that it suffers from "a sickness of discord and disaffection, of division and self-division, which has neither crisis nor abatement."[1] Discord is pervasive, manifested not only in this society's major racial divisions but also within these divisions and within individuals: it is a view that holds out little hope for South Africans, who can neither trust to an abatement of their sickness nor precipitate a crisis in it. Microcosms of such a society are created in Jacobson's first two short novels.[2]

A British critic recently recalled and appropriated *A Dance in the Sun* as "one of our few clear, good and strong, examples of straight realism."[3] The novels' first South African critic, G.H. Durrant, takes George Eliot as his norm and is consequently disappointed by the comparative lack of solidity in Jacobson's work.[4] Praise for their realism, on the other hand, occurs against a background of pre-1950s South African novels in which Africa was either romanticized or the racial situation given garish prominence, and there is an echo of Jacobson's earlier praise of Schreiner (see p.14 above) in H.K. Girling's praise of him for writing naturally about the issues of South African society.[5]

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[1] "Settling in England," p. 27.

[2] *The Trap* and *A Dance in the Sun* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968). All references in the text are to this edition. First published in 1955 and 1956 respectively.

[3] A.S. Byatt, "People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to 'Realism' and 'Experiment' in English Postwar Fiction," in *The Contemporary English Novel*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies no.18(London: Edward Arnold 1979), p. 34.

[4] "Promising Young Men," *Standpunte*, II (December 1956), 65.

[5] "Provincial and Continental: Writers in South Africa, *English Studies in Africa*, III (September 1960), 116.

As 'microcosms,' *The Trap* and *A Dance in the Sun* also have a representational quality, and have been called parables and socio-political allegories.[6] Realism here takes on the qualities of allegory by virtue of the typicality of the characters, the symbolic nature and patterning of much of the action which is compressed into a tight, or as Wade calls it "emblematic" form [7] (*The Trap* was apparently cut down to half its original length).[8] In *A Dance in the Sun*, though its symbolism is more insistent through the writer's repeated evocations of landscape and the heightened quality of the characters' behaviour, Jacobson has moved away from the stark poise of *The Trap*. An earnest moral voice is introduced which indicates that sense of obligation to say the right thing about South Africa to which the writer later admits (See p.15 above) and an odd juxtaposition of the prosaic and the symbolic occurs.

Representativeness makes for a certain thinness in characterization. Durrant says of *A Dance in the Sun* that it gives a "fleeting and perhaps superficial glimpse" from the outside of the lives it evaluates,[9] and Girling speaks with qualified admiration of Jacobson's detachment.[10] Indeed the symbolic representation of South African society in these novels

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[6] See Con Baxter, "Political Symbolism in *A Dance in the Sun*," *English in Africa*, V (September 1978), 44-50; Renee Winegarten, "The Novels of Dan Jacobson" and Michael Wade's article.

[7] Wade, p. 40.

[8] Ronald Hayman, Dan Jacobson in Interview, *Books and Bookmen* (February 1980), p. 46.

[9] Durrant, "Promising Young Men," p. 65.

[10] "Compassion and Detachment in the Novels of Dan Jacobson," *Purple Renoster* (Spring 1957) p. 23.

serves to distance its human reality. Disbelief in the possibility of meaningful social change, which underlies the novels, was also a factor in Jacobson's decision to emigrate; they thus convey like Doris Lessing's first novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950), a sense of symbolic valediction. Significantly, both Lessing and Jacobson are able to return from the distance of England to a realist treatment of their African experiences: Lessing in the first four volumes of her *Children of Violence* series,[11] Jacobson less autobiographically in *The Beginners* (1966).

Reference to his work as a whole suggests moreover that it is not simply South African society that Jacobson is depicting in his first two novels, but a pattern in human life of which this society is a public embodiment - a pattern of attempted escape from what one is, of failure and humiliation, which recurs in all his novels.

The Trap

The title refers to the traps set by Willem for van Schoor and by Maclachlan for Willem, but also to South African society as a whole which is seen as limiting and painful for all involved in it, including those it is designed to benefit. *The Trap* is about a white farmer, van Schoor, who believes that he has a relationship of trust with his head labourer, Willem, only to discover that Willem is involved in stealing his sheep. Willem is betrayed by his partner, the butcher Maclachlan, and white justice descends on him. In exposing notions of trust, justice and

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[11] *Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage* (1954), *Ripple from the Storm* (1958), *Landlocked* (1965).

power in a divided society, Jacobson shows that the individual is restricted by his position within the South African socio-political system.

The chief protagonists, van Schoor and Willem, deceive themselves by not recognizing this. Van Schoor falsely assumes that familiarity and trust can exist between white master and black labourer, exceeding but not threatening their traditional relationship, and judges Willem solely in terms of the expectations set up by this relationship. Willem can thus easily deceive him: he accuses Setole, another labourer who has discovered his theft, of 'dirty business' and deflects van Schoor's questions into an admission of Willem's worth as a 'Kaffir' in terms that he knows will ensure sympathy from his *baas*:

> 'Baas,' Willem said, 'the baas knows me well. I'm not a bad Kaffir. I do my work and I do it well. Has the baas ever had to complain against me that I didn't do my work properly?'
>
> 'No Willem.'
>
> 'And I am honest, baas. Has the baas ever missed anything that he gave me to keep?'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'Ja, baas. And the reason, baas, the reason is that I am a Kaffir with respect. I've got respect. I'm not the sort of man who goes around without respect for anything. The baas knows that I have respect.'
>
> 'Respect' ... van Schoor had often heard that word from Willem. It was the heart of his values. It was the core of his religion, his sobriety, his awareness of his status and his skin, and that of his master, his honesty, his faithfulness to his wife ...
>
> He said now: 'Yes, Willem, I know that you are a boy with respect.'

> 'Ja, baas. Then if I've got respect, what must I do with a man who's got no respect at all, who's filthy - a dirty man, baas? I can't say how dirty he is, baas.' (pp. 17-18)

Later it becomes clear that Willem cares nothing for a white man's appreciation of his decency, so his emphasis on 'respect' in this passage is a deliberate appeal to a notion he knows will carry weight with van Schoor. It is rather Setole, whom van Schoor misjudges, who has a certain basic honesty and self-respect despite his miserable appearance and itinerant status. Willem and Setole are implicitly contrasted, their different responses to the subordinate position they share conveyed, for example, by repeated allusions to the directness of Setole's gaze and the obscurity of Willem's expression. In the opening scene Setole's bluntness with van Schoor contrasts with Willem's flattery of him, and Setole's self-respect in his work is unobstrusively emphasized on the morning when van Schoor looks for him at the kraal that is being built. The other labourers are lounging about and spring into ingratiating activity on van Schoor's approach, whereas Setole is already working "carefully" and hardly pauses for the greeting, "'Morning baas'" (p.24-25). Yet the fact that Willem presents himself as a 'good Kaffir' carries more weight with van Schoor than does Setole's good work. This directly contradicts van Schoor's stated principle in the opening scene, where he defends first Willem and then Setole against the other's complaints:

> 'I don't like that Willem,' Setole said unexpectedly. Van Schoor said: 'I don't listen when my boys talk about one another. I'm not interested in whether you like Willem or Willem likes you. If you have a proper complaint you can make it.'
>
> (pp. 12-13)

> Willem shook his head. 'A drunkard is a terrible thing, baas,' he said lightly.
>
> 'As long as he does work I don't care what he is.'
>
> 'Ja, baas. That is all that matters for the baas and for the farm,' Willem smilingly agreed. (p. 14)

Van Schoor seems to be insisting on a relationship based on the quality of his labourer's work, but his judgement of Setole's case is made according to particularly South African rather than objective criteria. Willem in insisting on his 'respect' exploits a feature of the limited nature of whites' judgement of blacks. Given this society's lack of legal protection for blacks, van Schoor is able to order Setole off his farm without giving him a hearing. Where in the opening scene he had shown concern for Setole (p. 10), now in shouting at and shaking Setole he resorts to the violence which his status allows him - his unfairness and his violence show him doubly trapped in white *baasskap*.

As van Schoor's character is crucial to an interpretation of *The Trap* it should be noted that he shows himself capable from early on in the novel of resorting to violence in his dealings with blacks. This takes a subtler form in the humour he imagines he shares with his labourers. In the opening scene he finds Setole in the veld, suffering the after-effects of drink and assault, and helps him; their subsequent conversation includes a reference to another farmer, Harris:

> 'Baas Harris is also a good baas,' Setole said.
>
> 'You mean any baas is a good baas who doesn't give you the sack when you come home drunk.'
>
> 'That's right, baas. Like Baas Harris said, when I'm sober, I work well, and I only get drunk on Sundays.'
>
> 'Instead of going to church!'
>
> 'Does the baas go to church on Sundays?'
>
> 'Not very often,' van Schoor laughed. 'You get clever when they give you a hiding. But you'd get even cleverer if you went to church like Willem....
>
> ... Willem is a good boy. He goes to church, you know.' (p. 12)

Van Schoor's paternalistic familiarity is a form of contempt, which emerges more strongly in his reply when Willem, on coming to help him with Setole, asks:

> 'What does the baas want me to do with him?'
> 'To take him away.'
> 'Take him where, baas?'
> Van Schoor jerked his head. 'Where do you think I want you to take him? I want you to take him into my house, and give him a bath, and put my clothes on him, and put him in my bed. What else should I want you to do with him?'
> Willem's head dropped. They enjoyed the irony for a moment, Willem smiling faintly. ... (p. 14)

In so unequal a relationship, familiarity implies the forced acquiescence of the weaker party, though Willem in this case only appears to acquiesce - his secret smile is understood when it is later revealed that he loathes being treated in this way and is getting the better of van Schoor by stealing his sheep. The one-sidedness of van Schoor's humour is explicitly shown in the scene where Willem accuses Setole to him. Despite the seriousness of what he is being told, van Schoor is distracted by Willem's son, squatting beside them. Without considering his right to do so, he pushes the child over with his foot:

> ... Silently, almost experimentally, van Schoor slowly put a foot forward, caught the boy on the projecting knee, and pushed. The boy fell over on his back, 'A, nee baas!' escaping from him as he sprawled. He pulled himself back to his squatting position, teeth shining in a smile. When he had brought himself to balance, van Schoor's foot again came silently forward and again the boy fell. Neither Willem nor van Schoor said anything. This time the boy did not say anything, nor did he smile. (p. 20)

Jacobson's characters tend to enjoy one another's discomfort Van Schoor indulges the tendency again when he creeps up silently behind another labourer to knock the cap off his head (p. 24). The ambiguity in van Schoor's character is counteracted in the final two chapters, where he is depicted in such a way that his violence toward Willem in the final scene claims the significance of a 'fall.' Jacobson thus gives his story a correct liberal meaning by implying that his vision is of basic individual goodness corrupted by the South African system; this has been accepted as the story's meaning by Wade and others who interpret van Schoor as a relative 'innocent.'[12] But there is something about van Schoor's characterization in these two chapters which does not ring true. Consider, for example, Jacobson's description of him in the organic terms which Wade feels indicate Jacobson's sense of van Schoor's positive potential; the description is important in eliciting the reader's sympathy for him and in accentuating the sense of an organic link having been broken, a 'fall' having occurred, when van Schoor is alienated from his environment in the final chapter:

> ... All the years that he had spent in work on the land rested neither lightly nor heavily on him, but seemed to have passed through him, as the soft hair thinned on his head and the lines on his face became more marked, until there was something almost lizard-like about his face in its leathery wrinkledness, its imperviousness to heat.

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[12] Wade, pp. 46-47. See also Midge Decter, "Novelist of South Africa" in *The Liberated Woman and other Americans* (New York: Coward, McCann, 1971) and the articles by Girling and Winegarten.

> The sun had got into him young, and it had not merely faded him as it does so many whites, but had given him strength. He had the strength of leather, of biltong, of an African's feet who walks bare foot all his life, the strength of anything left long in the open and the sun. ... (p. 44)

Lizards, leather, biltong, African's feet? The contrived quality of the images may simply mean that in his first novel Jacobson has not yet mastered clichés, but it recalls Don Maclennan's remark on Jacobson's short stories, that they convey "a feeling of *exteriorization*, of work directed inward from an exterior framework, as though Jacobson kept asking himself: 'Now which would the appropriate detail be?'"[13] One feels manipulated into responding to the passage as a whole.

Durrant criticizes the depiction of van Schoor's violence in the final scene:

> ... Mr Jacobson may have in his own mind a full picture of the passion that is meant to drive van Schoor to this act - but it is not displayed to the reader. Nor is it easy to believe that this one incident, however important to a struggling farmer, could induce a mature man to adopt a new attitude to all his native workers, and to regard them as 'swine'.[14]

Certainly the sudden symbolic movement of the final scene does not arise convincingly from the previous action, but not because van Schoor is so 'mature' that one cannot credit his violence. Rather it is that his violence

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[13] "The South African Short Story," *English Studies in Africa*, XIII (March 1970), 118.

[14] Durrant, p. 64.

is not really surprising: the perversity or meanness in him has already been shown, facilitated but not caused by the system he lives under, so that in this system's final swamping of his private life the images of shock and violation are overdrawn. The truth about human nature as Jacobson perceives it is not altogether compatible with the meaning required by his South African allegory.

The trap which finally closes on van Schoor's trust, is one to which he is made vulnerable by his assumption that he is correct in his judgement of blacks. Setole hints at this vulnerability when, dismissed from the farm, he confronts van Schoor:

> 'One day I hope the baas will hear the truth of what is happening on this farm.'
>
> 'I have heard the truth,' van Schoor said.
>
> 'The baas believes that he has heard the truth. But he has not heard all the truth, and I am not going to tell him. I could also tell the baas some stories ...'
>
> 'I have heard one story. It was enough. What stories could you tell me?'
>
> 'They are things that I have heard and I have seen. But why should I tell them to the baas? Why should I help you, baas? The baas must see for himself what is happening on the farm, otherwise he will believe anything that's told to him, and no matter who tells it. I am not going to help you, baas, because I don't want to help you.'
>
> 'I don't know what you're talking about.'
>
> 'I know, baas.'
>
> This time there was no mistaking it - Setole was mocking his baas. Van Schoor stared steadily at Setole, and Setole looked back. Setole's eyes were weak, bloodshot, and there was a faint blue ring round each iris, a pale unlikely colour in that dark face. His eyes were like mud, the sort one finds near a river's bank, slightly iridescent. Setole's eyes

were gleaming, in mockery.

'Setole, is there really anything on the farm that you know about?' van Schoor asked.

'What should the Kaffir know that the baas doesn't know.'

'It isn't like that now. I am asking you.'

'It is always like that, my baas.' (pp. 30-31)

The ironic reversal at the end of this passage is the only comeback that Setole has. His acceptance that 'it is always like that' is another point of contrast between him and Willem, for in terms of Jacobson's plan for his characters Willem has still to learn that he is trapped, always in some sense subservient to whites. He deludes himself by believing that working in partnership with Maclachlan and cheating van Schoor will allow him an escape from the narrow confines of his identity as a black man. This belief is evident in his aggressive exchange with Maclachlan, which contrasts sharply with his sycophantic approach to van Schoor in the previous chapter:

'You're a bloody cheeky Kaffir. Do you hear me? Don't you know how to talk to a white man?'

'I talk to you differently,' Willem said.

'You're enjoying this, aren't you?'

'Yes,' Willem replied. He could not conceal the fact, and saw no need to.

Maclachlan said: 'You're a partner with a white man.'

'Yes.'

Maclachlan stared at his own white skin on his arm. Something was stirring within him. 'You're a partner with a white man, but you're still a cheeky Kaffir.'

'I'm not a cheeky Kaffir'

'What are you then?'

'Willem of Driehoek.'

'And Willem of Driehoek is a cheeky Kaffir. You're a Kaffir, a Kaffir, a Kaffir. And I'm a white man.'

Willem laughed. 'That won't help you. They'll put us in different jails, that's all.' (pp. 38-39).

Willem relishes his unaccustomed power, but goes too far in playing on Maclachlan's fear and triggers off the white man's scheme to betray and be rid of him. The impossibility of self-transcendence, the common experience of Jacobson's characters, has its first banal dramatization in this attempt of his to act as 'Willem of Driehoek,' which leads only to the devastating enforcement of white law against him as a 'Kaffir' in the final scene.

In Jacobson's South African novels, with the exception of *The Evidence of Love*, black characters are predominantly portrayed as subservient to whites. He perceives the South African system as being so rigid that contact beyond the master-servant relationship is impossible. In an article published while he was still living in Kimberley and was busy writing *The Trap*, Jacobson explains his inability to work actively for change in South Africa:

> ... I can't work with the Africans because I don't know them. I don't know what they think or how they think. I don't know their feelings, except in a gross sort of way, without subtlety in my guesses. I don't know what they want or whether they want the same things as I do. I feel completely strange to them, alien, though they are the people among whom I grew up, the people who have nursed me, and worked for me, and with whom I spend at least as much time as I do with white men. But I don't *know* them, or feel I don't, and can never know them, because they are black.[15]

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[15] "A White Liberal Trapped by his Prejudices," *Commentary*, XV (May 1953), 454.

This limitation is reflected in the structure and characterization of *The Trap*. The novel is divided into four chapters, each one bearing the name of one of the four main characters: Setole, Maclachlan, van Schoor, Willem. But whereas the chapters devoted to the two white men deal in detail with their thoughts and feelings, the two blacks are shown only in reaction to whites, and what they feel must be observed in their behaviour. When Jacobson does attempt momentarily to reverse the situation of white man observing black, as in Setole's confrontation with van Schoor or Willem's with Maclachlan, the result is disconcerting.[16]

Judging by the partial triumphs accorded to Setole in *The Trap* and to Joseph in *A Dance in the Sun*, it would seem that the only position of strength which Jacobson sees possible for blacks within the South African system is not in defiance of its terms but in acceptance and ironical use of them against those whose privilege they are designed to support. This raises the question already mentioned in connection with Jacobson's short stories, as to the value of irony as social criticism (see p. 20 above). The irony of the South African situation is exploited in many short stories ending in photographic stills of some conjunction of character and event which ironically collapses our social and racial categories. In Setole's answer to van Schoor, and Joseph's to Fletcher, Jacobson stands the master-servant relationship on its head but explores nothing beyond it, as for example Alan Paton and Harold Bloom do in very different ways in *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) and *Episode* (1956), or as Nadine Gordimer does in all her novels. Jacobson simply observes his black characters in a situation which he defines as helpless.

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[16] Wade (p. 48) discusses the first passage.

It is consistent with Jacobson's view of this divided society and of human relationships in any society, that if blacks' position in general is hopeless, they also cannot even derive comfort from one another. Willem and Setole hate one another and a black corporal, Ngkane, helps in Willem's arrest and holds him upright to be punched by the white men. Ngkane's silence and lack of characterization throughout the final chapter indicate the complete loss of identity he has suffered in working for whites while still not being accepted by them. Jacobson draws attention to the fact that his name has been adapted to 'Kane' by isolating it at the beginning of one of the final chapter's subdivisions. A play on the name of Cain, betrayer of his brother is intended, and is the first example of the kind of word play which Jacobson uses intermittently to emphasise his meanings: in *A Dance in the Sun*, the young Afrikaner's name is Nasie (nation), in the short story "A Way of Life" (1962)[17] the middle-class white liberals are called the Capons, and in Jacobson's latest novel his morally bankrupt hero says of his mistress: "She was ... on the way down. I had to be more careful, I was a Baisz, rising."[18] Ngkane's name gains a sinister meaning in being Europeanized, but the fact of what he remains to the whites is conveyed in the overdrawn symbolism of the following passage:

> 'Kane,' Prinsloo called. They came to the back of the truck. It was dark inside: they could see only obscure movements.
> Then Willem and the African policeman appeared. They were handcuffed together: they had to move together, as

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17 In *Through the Wilderness*, pp. 47-57.

18 In *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977), p. 71.

> though they were helping each other. They stood at the duck-board of the van. 'Come down,' Prinsloo said. Willem and the policeman looked at each other, and the policeman moved his braceleted hand in a signal, and clumsily and carefully the two of them managed to stand on the duckboard itself. They tottered there for a moment. They moved very slowly, almost sluggishly, like creatures in a dream, locked together, silent. Then Ngkane said, 'All right,' and together they jumped down, hitting the ground at the same time, almost falling, but managing not to. The handcuffs between them clattered. Swaying, still together like Siamese twins, they staggered towards the white men who gave way a little at their coming. At last they struck balance and stood. (p. 53.)

'Kane' is a 'Kaffir,' a non-person.

But the 'sickness of division and self-division' is shown to be at work amongst the whites as well. In the final chapter Willem is brought to van Schoor for punishment. Prinsloo, the policeman, representative of white authority, and Maclachlan whose evidence is accepted because he is white, both encourage van Schoor to exercise his right as Willem's *baas*. The scene is a triumph for white solidarity yet the characters' experience is one of tension and isolation from one another. Maclachlan betrays great unease, and though only the reader is aware that his unease in relation to the other whites arises from his deception of them - which of course belies any appearance of white solidarity - they too find his behaviour jarring.

Van Schoor's isolation is established in the chapter's opening paragraphs, loaded with symbolic premonitions of violence and exposure. He watches from his stoep the approach of the van bringing Prinsloo, Maclachlan, Ngkane and Willem:

> He turned to look for the car again, and with a shock saw the lights were not travelling along the road. The car was coming across the veld, its headlights aimed straight at his house. He stared at it in disbelief, but the lights grew stronger and closer: he saw how insanely they were bounding across the veld. Two eyes staring at him across the veld. In their light all the weaker lights of the sky disappeared, and now all shadows stretched away from that shining centre. He heard no sound: he only saw the lights shining, leaping, bucking closer. Then he heard the whine of an engine, and the lights stood for a moment. The whine ended and the lights leaped forward again. They were near. They were level with the native huts, and van Schoor saw them harshly outlined against the night, flat brown walls, all straight lines, and hollows of darkness between. And the glare of the lights caught him between the eyes, and he lifted one hand to ward them off. It was too bright, a great mechanical dazzle that filled the farm. He staggered back, arm shielding his eyes, and the flesh behind his closed eyelids was streaked over and over again with a livid white dazzle like lightning.
>
> When he took his hand away from his face and opened his eyes, the light was gone from them. The van, it was a van, not a car, was parked in front of his house. The headlights stabbed the darkness: they shone on rock, and on the strong black line of the wire fence round the garden, they caught thorn trees in grotesque attitudes. (p. 48)

The whole of the subsequent scene in which he is forced to participate appears grotesque and bewildering to van Schoor: he hears Maclachlan's voice "beating against the air" (p. 51) but can make no meaning of the sounds; he sees that Willem's face is distorted but takes a moment to realize that Maclachlan and Prinsloo must have beaten him up when they first caught him (p. 54); as they strike Willem again, van Schoor finds it difficult to

believe that "these strange gestures the men had made, like people pushing at a door or showing someone something, had been blows against a face" (p. 54); and when he first punches Willem he "remembers" the action as though from a long time ago (p. 56). Van Schoor's bewilderment is emphasized in order to estrange him from Prinsloo and Maclachlan who expect "agitation, anger, excitement and in a particular secret way, fun" (p. 51) and who set the example in striking Willem.

Van Schoor still attempts to communicate with his former 'boss boy,' to understand why Willem stole from him, but is answered only by Willem's "unknowing stare" (p. 55). Willem's earlier attempt to tell the truth about Maclachlan had been beaten to silence; now in facing van Schoor he sees only another white man and feels the futility of accusing one white man to another. So while van Schoor prays for any response, even a "cheeky remark" from him and finally asks the pathetic question: "And where is your respect?" (p. 56), Willem merely shrugs. Having invoked what he thought was the basis of their relationship and thereby exposed his own self-deception, van Schoor resorts to the crudest terms of their relationship, smashing his fist into Willem's face in a show of *baasskap* over him. Thus while Willem becomes a victim van Schoor is at the same time shown to be trapped into a white stereotype.

His violence gives him no sense, as it does the others, of "justice being executed, more than justice, right following its ritual in the dark" (p. 56). He is aware of the brutality of his action, the fact that it will inevitably increase and its immediate effect on his relationship with his mentally disturbed wife. Where earlier comforting her and avoiding trouble from her was second nature to van Schoor (p. 49), now he raises his hand to her, and the estrangement between them becomes open aggression:

> 'Shut your mouth', van Schoor said, and strode up to her, one hand lifted. His hand trembled in the air, and Mrs van Schoor shrank, dropped her head, her neck tense. Slowly van Schoor's hand dropped to his side, and slowly Mrs van Schoor lifted her head. She hissed out triumphantly, 'so ... so ...' Her eyes shone, and her body remained crouched. She stayed in the lamlight like a glad, demented animal. She could spring now, tomorrow, always, all the days on their farm. (pp. 57-58)

The novel ends with the men talking and joking loudly over their coffee, van Schoor withdrawn, his wife chanting meaninglessly to herself.

The Trap presents a social microcosm in which the Afrikaners, the blacks and the Afrikanerized Englishman (Maclachlan) are all isolated as individuals, their worst characteristics accentuated by the system under which they live. The abusiveness and deceit allowed Maclachlan as a white man, make him grotesque: as a man whose behaviour is not checked by external authority he is a pointer to what any white man may become when his tendency towards brutality overcomes internal checks. As to the black characters, Setole is trapped whether he works well or not, Willem whether he flatters or cheats, Ngkane even in working for whites. The plot suggests that beyond their divergent experiences of being trapped into the system, black and white share a common inhumanity which has very little to do with racial barriers, for Maclachlan, whose assumption of inherent racial differences is most blatant, deceives his fellow white *baas* and betrays Willem just as Willem had deceived van Schoor and betrayed his fellow black labourer, Setole.

It is a disturbing point about this novel, and one which it shares with Jacobson's other work, that the one common experience of the four otherwise divided characters, is that of humiliation. Setole, whom van Schoor shakes

until his body "waggled loosely, without dignity" (p. 27); Maclachlan weeping in fear at Willem's disclosure that someone knows about them (p. 36); Willem beaten till his face is "featureless blood" his head "lolling" (p. 54); van Schoor "utterly empty, defeated" before Willem (p. 55): all point to Jacobson's external frame of reference by underlining the destructiveness of the South African system, but also to his private view of man which dictates that all his main characters come, through humiliation, to realize the limitations of who they really are.

His pessimistic statement about South Africa in *The Trap* is thus threefold: (i) the severe limitations on any South African identity obviate understanding beyond it; (ii) this restricted position allows the individual no sense of community with others who share it; (iii) to be trapped is to be humiliated. The liberal belief that the individual's struggle to 'live better' irrespective of the nature of his society - the motivating belief in contemporaneous novels like *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), Jack Cope's *The Golden Oriole* (1958) or Gordimer's first novel *The Lying Days* (1953) - is not endorsed, let alone the belief that such a struggle can be recognized and shared by others. Jacobson admittedly shows the practice of oppression as harmful to the oppressor (a liberal point which Gordimer says is obliquely comforting to white conscience[19]): van Schoor is conscious of his own brutalization in inflicting violence on Willem, and the novel ends with an image of his loss of freedom: "Van Schoor sat, holding his injured hand. It was already beginning to swell; insistently,

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[19] "English-language Literature and Politics in South Africa," p. 101.

it was beating against his free hand" (p. 58). But this is an idealization for the purposes of a neat ending to the allegory. This 'fall' was not preceded by a state of innocence: van Schoor was never free of his own perversity.

In Paton's novel *Too Late The Phalarope* (1953) the hero, Pieter van Vlaanderen, a white man caught by the system, is characterized as so noble that his fall constitutes a private and social tragedy; 'The system' is clearly the enemy, unable to accommodate the individual, whereas in van Schoor's case (setting aside the doubts that he feels yet dismisses in dealing with Setole and Willem) the system is a set of circumstances that he embraces with rough humour so long as it does not hurt him, and brutally when it does. Similarly, Jacobson's black characters can be compared to, for example, Mabaso in *Episode* or Glanvill Peake in *The Golden Oriole*, both portrayed from the inside in such a way as to make it easy for the reader to identify them as objects of sympathy. In these novels too, the system is the enemy against which the characters struggle and are crushed, and is the object of the writers' liberal criticism. Sympathy elicited by Jacobson's novel cannot as easily find its object, for the system is not the enemy, opposed by individuals, but a permanent and insidious condition.

A Dance in the Sun.

In his second novel Jacobson uses a first-person narrator in order to present as discovery the statement about his society as a dead-end made in *The Trap*, i.e. to gain new access to the same problems. The naivety of the narrator's social criticism is very marked after the pessimism of *The Trap* and is also at odds with the sense of futility which accumulates in his observations of landscape. Contrary to Girling's comment that

"the horror in *A Dance in the Sun* is made more haunting by its casual presentation,"[20] the narrator's comments are often over-anxious and strained rather than casual.

How such strain arises is suggested by Jacobson's own analysis of the difficulties facing a writer in a Commonwealth country. The lack of a sufficient local audience, he says, together with the writer's desire to be accepted into the mother culture, force him to seek an overseas audience, not familiar with his material. This encourages

> ... that wearisome explaining of local conditions by the novelist (or poet), which on the one side becomes indistinguishable from the deliberate exploitation of local colour, and on the other side leads to prosy interpolations into the structure of the novel or poem ... The absence of a local audience to which the writer is answerable, first and last, produces in him the wrong sort of self-consciousness both about his audience and his subject matter.[21]

As a South African writer Jacobson is particularly open to self-consciousness about his subject matter, for it is uniquely dominated by the sensitive race issue, and any 'explaining of local conditions' involves implicit or explicit judgement of this issue. In *A Dance in the Sun* he is obviously anxious to make his judgement clear, though the fulfilment of what he later calls his obligation to do so operates concurrently with the decision in his personal

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[20] "South African Novelists and Story-Writers," *English Studies in Africa*, IV (March 1961), 85.

[21] "The Writer in the Commonwealth," pp. 162-63.

life against further involvement in this country. This too is according to Jacobson a basic dilemma for the Commonwealth writer: how to reconcile his desire to turn away from his country's comparative cultural paucity, with the necessity of concentrating on it as the material he knows best.

Certainly in *A Dance in the Sun*, *The Evidence of Love* and to a lesser extent in *The Price of Diamonds*, Jacobson is over-anxious to make certain correct points. So for example in *A Dance in the Sun*, when the black man Joseph first approaches the unnamed narrator to ask his help, asserting that he "knew the baas wasn't a Boer," Jacobson has the narrator comment

> This may have been a tribute to the Afrikaans I had spoken to him, but it was rather more than that too. If he had approached me on the strength of my not being an Afrikaner, or Boer as he preferred to put it, he had been foolhardy and reckless: English-speaking whites are not necessarily more friendly to the Africans than Afrikaans-speaking whites. Surely he knew that. I said to him: 'So? Just because I'm not a Boer doesn't mean that I won't make trouble for you.' (p. 85)

And on Mrs Fletcher's story about Joseph he says:

> I was surprised that she had become so talkative, but the story itself disappointed me: I had expected something more. The story was so much one that, with variants, I had come across so often before: complaints, grievances, a well-nursed sense of injury against African servants are all common enough: sometimes one would think it's the whites who are oppressed by their servants, the way they complain about them. (p. 94)

In each case, the specific point is clear in context and the narrator's comment unnecessarily explains and generalizes it. Jacobson appears to use such comment both to explain the local situation as though for an audience unfamiliar with it, and to make his own judgement clear. This

is the function of the long incident between his friend Frank and the old black man, not otherwise essential to the plot, which the narrator reconstructs from Frank's story:

> ... Frank was only half-way across, about at the kitchen door, when the African saw him and started making towards him. Quietly and absurdly, Frank went on, but the African, though he was wearing a pair of trousers far too big for him and torn in each leg right up the calf, so that he had to flop about inside them and have them sweep the yard behind him, soon caught up with Frank.
>
> 'Baas?' the African said.
>
> 'Yes,' Frank said shortly, coming to a halt.
>
> 'Did basie get the hot water I made for him?'
>
> 'Yes,' Frank said, determined not to give the man the tip for which he was presumably angling, and beginning to walk on again, abandoning subterfuge, and simply moving fast. But the African kept alongside him, trousers trailing.
>
> '*Dankie baas*,' he said.
>
> This again brought Frank to a halt. What could the man be thanking him for? Because he had stopped and said 'Yes'? Or in advance, for the tip that he hoped Frank might give him? Or just because he felt that he had to thank a white man no matter what he did - for being a white man, as it were? The African responded to Frank's stare with another enthusiastic, '*Dankie baas*,' and Frank could only decide that the man was thanking him for being a white man. The African had come to pay his respects. He had come to make an obeisance: the approach had been a disinterested one. (p. 105-6)

The explanation in the last paragraph is superfluous, as the old man's automatic subservience is amply stressed in the paragraph following where his appearance is described:

> ... He was a tiny, wizened old man, in size no bigger than a boy, with a tiny, wrinkled, yellow face, like an apple left too long in storage. His black, monkey-like eyes acknowledged Frank's stare by blinking several times; and then, bringing his hand to his head in a salutation, and taking from his head the rag of a cap he wore, he without question or hesitation agreed with whatever it was that Frank might have been thinking.
>
> 'Ja baas,' he said with conviction, taking no risks at all. (p. 106)

His state of physical neglect and his pathetically tentative manner are emphasized. As the old man's dialogue with Frank continues the picture is compounded by the fact that he is crying, that his approach is so abject as to evoke Frank's contempt, that he speaks without indignation of Fletcher's hitting him - all with the clear intention of arousing pity in the reader for the old man and indignation at the society which makes such treatment possible. As though Jacobson is not sure that this has been achieved, however, he has the narrator reflect:

> ...It seemed almost as though the little man had found a certain philosophical consolation in the thought that the fist which had been applied was better than the *sjambok* which had not: for someone who looked as though he fought for his food with dogs, slept on sacks, drank water that cattle had pissed in, and clothed himself in rags that every possible thorn and nail and piece of barbed wire had torn - for the human equivalent of a sack-and-paraffin-tin *pondokkie* in a location - there might well have been consolation in such a thought. (p. 107)

This outburst is almost petulant in its clarification of a point which the scene has already made clear, and such overclarification occurs frequently in the novel. At the end of the very effective scene in which Joseph traps the young men into admitting their white prejudice by offering them money to help him, the narrator adds: "... he had exposed the tenacity and duplicity of my own feelings of white *baasskap* - my own 'liberal' intolerances, my own assertion of where his place should be, and where mine" (pp. 155-56); and during the final scene when Joseph is obviously not cooperating with their attempts to help him, the narrator again explains as though to an unfamiliar audience: "He agreed with me promptly. I no longer knew to what it was that he was agreeing. I couldn't have told from the tone of his voice either, for he produced his agreement automatically like what is known as a 'good Kaffir.'" (p. 200).

Such comments illustrate what Maclennan calls Jacobson's "peculiar consciousness of political and social theory - a kind of university consciousness,"[22] and Abrahams his "apologetic state of mind." Reviewing a collection of Jacobson's short stories, *A Long Way from London* (1958), Abrahams says of this state of mind that it:

> ... leads him to some of his best material. But the urge to placate the social conscience also leads him in several instances to the misuse of his material and his powers. He has to make sure that his fables have the "correct" meaning. He is anxious on this point, and so, instead of trusting to his own

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[22] Maclennan, p. 118.

> considerable narrative power, he frequently interpolates footnote-ish comments ... which are usually dispensable and sometimes quite unacceptable. Instead of leaving the events in his stories to speak, as they so eloquently do, for themselves, he surrounds the firm core of incidents with a great, soft area of commentary, explanation, interpretation ... [23]

Girling in commenting that Jacobson "tells his story as discovery and refrains from explicit interpretation"[24] misunderstands the essential link for the writer's purpose between the first-person narrator's participation and sense of discovery in the events that take place, and the explicit reaction to and interpretation of them which he can thus give. His naivety, which allows for his as it were blurting out observations on the South African scene, is suggested by the novel's opening sentence ("This is a story of what happened once to myself and a friend of mine, and of what we saw and heard in a house near a little village in the Karroo" (p. 63)), and reinforced by various incidents of boyishly self-conscious humour, like his description of the navy-blue portrait of Mrs. Fletcher's father (p. 73); his comment at the end of the otherwise tense scene in which Mrs. Fletcher shows him Joseph's waiting figure beyond her boundary (p. 97), and his description of Frank's hair, scabs and socks (p. 100).

But though Jacobson uses the narrator and his friend to make earnest liberal points, he also undercuts their credibility. This is the first novel in which he makes explicit his uneasy relationship with liberalism

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[23] Book Reviews, *Africa South*, III (April - June 1959), 130.

[24] "Compassion and Detachment in the Novels of Dan Jacobson," p. 18.

which is again apparent in *The Evidence of Love* and *The Beginners*. He casts doubt on the narrator's liberalism by showing his and Frank's handling of blacks to be clumsy, and subjects them towards the end of the novel to two humiliating exposures of their white prejudice. Wade has noted the young men's representative function in the novel as witnesses;[25] but in both saying the right liberal things and taking the beating of Jacobson's doubts about liberalism, they also function unintentionally as indicators of Jacobson's ambiguous attitude towards his South African material at this stage in his career. In a short story written at this time, "A Long Way from London" (1955),[26] Jacobson portrays South African liberalism in a favourable light, and gives a satirical account of the attempt of a literary young man in London to shed the claims of his South African past. Something of an exile's guilt is suggested, and Jacobson's ambiguity towards his past is clear.

As in *The Trap*, Jacobson sees South Africans, and in this novel the whites in particular, as estranged from one another; defined as the sickness of their society, this condition can be said to estrange them from normality. The notion of estrangement pervades the novel: two young men are hitch-hiking through the Karoo to Cape Town for a holiday, passing through a landscape which they find alien. They are given a lift in the van of a young Afrikaner couple and find themselves on a journey - during which the narrator notes that his watch has stopped - to a *dorpie* off the main route ironically named 'Mirredal'. The Fletchers'

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[25] Wade, p. 55.

[26] In *A Long Way from London* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1958), pp. 151-71.

house, to which they are directed to seek accommodation, is separated from the village by a dry river bed, and Mrs. Fletcher later tells them of her suspicion of the villagers and their supposed envy of her. The members of the Fletcher household are in turn isolated from one another, and when the young men move on the following morning, no real understanding has been achieved between any of the characters. Clearly, Jacobson intends this as another microcosm of a divided society.

The failure of communication between the members of such a society is depicted from the opening pages. The narrator says of his contact with the young Afrikaans couple who give him and Frank a lift:

> Once we stopped to urinate, while the girl sat stolidly in the car staring straight in front of her and the three of us went behind a bush. Even on that most friendly of social occasions the youngster said almost nothing to us, not even to ask us where we were going. All he said was, *'Warm, ne?'*, and we, awkwardly said, *'Ja'* - it was hot. (p. 64)

Mrs. Fletcher's reception of them is stilted; though "in business putting people up," one of her first questions to the narrator is: "'Why don't you stay at the hotel?'" (p. 71). Even a minor character like the hotel barman illustrates a significant lack of communication in these surroundings and the individual's reluctant isolation:

> ... He was lonely and wistful in a way, for all his chatter and bright clothing, and followed us to the door, repeating his instructions on how to get to the other place. I saw his arm in its bright yellow sleeve pointing across the ragged, dun-coloured veld. 'You can't miss it. You can't go wrong from here.' He stood at the door and watched us go, with his hands in his pockets: I think he was half-hoping that we would go wrong, so that he would be able to explain things to us again. (p. 69)

Failure of communication is accentuated between the central white characters. That evening Fletcher dominates the dinner table with his emphatic opinions on everything from the world situation to the shortcomings of the Mirredal Hotel, oblivious of the young men's irritation and sarcasm. There is something absurd in his opinions ("'Kerboom!,' he exclaimed, his hands mushrooming over the white tablecloth. 'Everything smashed! Everything broken! Cities in ruins - Moscow, New York, London, in ruins. Everything radio-active ...'" (p. 75)), which characterizes all his behaviour: his locking and unlocking of the kitchen cupboards while fetching Frank a drink, his frantic scuffle with Frank to prevent him from leaving when Nasie arrives. His attempts to win his visitors over reach a bizarre climax later that night when he pleads and rages for hours in an attempt to get them to "stick by him" in his conflict with Joseph (p. 186). Again he raises the notion of white solidarity which he had wanted affirmed at dinner by the young men's agreement that "if all the educated Kaffir's should not be shot, then the agitators would do, or the communists, or the liberals" (p. 77). In all these incidents Fletcher fails to win the sympathy and submission from the young men that he is seeking. Both the absurdity of his behaviour, and the isolation in which it leaves him are manifestations of the hysteria of the white society which the Fletcher household symbolizes, though the recognition from others which he seeks as a way out of his isolation is a need experienced by many of Jacobson's characters irrespective of their relation to a particular society.

Manifesting a similar need, Mrs. Fletcher is also left alone and unsupported. Her attempts to get her brother Nasie to take her away with him are cruelly rejected, and her humiliation, like Fletcher's dance at the end of the novel, is conveyed in terms of her physical

reaction: her silent struggle to cling to Nasie and the superior strength with which he twice prizes her arms away from him. The final picture of her stretching out her arms to the silent night into which he has disappeared, is pitiful and shocking:

> 'Nasie,' she called. 'Why have you left me here? Come back for me, Nasie.'
>
> But from outside there came no reply. No stir, no murmur, not so much as a ripple in the dark, warm air. All was still. The air was as relaxed as it always is on a summer night in the Karroo, unruffled, undisturbed, without limit above the unpeopled earth. Mrs Fletcher waited with her arms stretched out before her: she wavered as her arms moved up and down a little in the strain of keeping them up: eventually she was forced to drop her arms. Not even the wind had answered her, no sign had been given to her, no token had come that she could be released from her attitude of desire, nothing had come from the darkness beyond the uneven oblong of light. The silent world was indifferent, exposing only by indifference the folly of what she had hoped for. There was ignominy in this last defeat.
>
> Ignominy and horror. We had seen much that was lonely and violent and pitiable in that evening, but I remember only one thing with horror. That is what we saw when Mrs Fletcher turned to face the room again ... (pp. 191-92).

Nasie's rampage through the house, wrecking his family's furniture, is a physical counterpart of Fletcher's random verbal violence, an attempt to leave his mark on the home that has rejected him. It is as bizarre and futile in its own as his sister's attempt to win a loving response from him and leaves him as alone.

Nasie was originally banished from the house because he had fathered the child of a black woman, Joseph's sister. But though he relives this

rebellion against inherited white norms by wrecking the father's house, he too regards his feeling for the black woman as a "fall into ... shame " (p. 181). Baxter says that in sleeping with Joseph's sister Nasie had "taken action to integrate himself with the land, to harmonize with it and its people."[27] His failure Baxter sees as Jacobson's pessimistic prophecy. But as with van Schoor, what makes it so pessimistic is not simply that an individual has been beaten by the system (in this case Fletcher's removal of the woman and child), but that basically he endorses and has always endorsed it.

The sense of conflict, and failure concentrated in the incidents described is a feature of all the characters' trapped position as whites. Mrs. Fletcher despises her husband and loves Nasie, but because she accepts white values she is forced to acquiesce in Fletcher's banishment of her brother from the house - which then becomes "a prison" (p. 147) to her. Fletcher's disposal of the woman and child initiates a series of events which at the end of the novel leaves Fletcher trapped by Joseph's insistence that he be allowed to work for him. Hysteria is central to the final image of each of these characters: Nasie wild with frustration, Mrs. Fletcher with despair, Fletcher with rage and humiliation.

The young liberal observers, overnight guests who can leave the Fletchers to their misery and whose racial prejudices are less crude than theirs, are nonetheless not spared the humiliating discovery of their limitations. Early in the novel Joseph asks the narrator to read aloud a letter stolen from the house, which he does, not as a political deed but as a way of spiting Fletcher. In making this admission the narrator recognizes, at

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[27] Baxter, p. 49.

least in retrospect, the tardiness of his liberal impulses; but his reprimanding tone with Joseph makes a stronger point, namely that the narrator unconsciously accepts his position as *baas*, a more blatant version of which he despises in Fletcher. He has to acknowledge this assumption when, in a later scene, he angrily rejects Joseph's offer of money for his help. As Joseph insists on his admitting, this is because he is a 'Kaffir'. Apart from its ironic purpose in exposing the young men's duplicity, this dialogue reinforces one's understanding of Jacobson's perception of the limitations of personal identity and interpersonal contact. Unlike Willem, Joseph wants to be accepted by these whites "as he was to everyone else - as a black man," and wants the narrator to help him as a *baas*. The relationship thus established between them is "straight and firm in our hands, like the heft of an axe" (pp. 156-57): while it may be honest, it also cuts off the possibility of further contact.

But the young men do not immediately assimilate the extent to which this is true. Joseph claims them as witnesses against Fletcher; but for their need to expiate the pity and guilt which they feel as young liberals, this is not sufficient. As whites they assume that they know what kind of help Joseph needs, and look forward to his gratitude. Again they are humiliated when he evades their offer:

> *'Ja baas,'* Joseph said, after a pause, though he had hardly seemed to have been considering what Frank had said to him. He looked from Frank to myself. Then he said again: *'Ja baas.'* There was a guardedness, a neutrality, in his voice that made me ask:
>
> 'So? What do you think?'
>
> 'Nothing, baas.'
>
> 'What do you mean you think nothing? What do you want us to do?'

> Joseph shuffled his feet, like a stupid and humble African.
> 'Nothing, baas,' he said.
> 'You want us to do nothing?' Frank asked, his voice rising.
> '*Ja baas*.'
> 'But you must need our help!' I exclaimed.
> 'Help baas? I don't think so, baas.'
> 'But we are your witnesses.'
> '*Ja baas*,' Josef said. 'Last night baas.'
> 'And this morning!'
> 'And this morning also baas.'
> 'So?'
> 'So nothing baas.'
> 'You mean you aren't going to go on?' Was he a coward, after all? I couldn't believe it.
> 'Go on, baas?'
> 'Yes, go on with Fletcher.'
> '*Ja baas*.'

They fail to gain the desired response as completely as did Fletcher with them or Mrs. Fletcher with Nasie. Their failure to impose white upon black will, their final humiliation when Joseph indicates that they should leave, anticipates Joseph's exchange with Fletcher in the same scene. In possession now of the knowledge that can ruin Fletcher, Joseph insists on working for him. Fletcher's reaction when his threats and orders have been thwarted is the dance on which the novel ends, a caricatured image of the futility of white authority, liberal or bigotted:

> We turned to look at Fletcher. Fletcher was dancing. Alone in the veld, in the middle of his dusty piece of ground, Fletcher was dancing with humiliation and rage and despair. He stamped his feet into the dust, and

> gnawed his knuckles, and twisted his ears, and pulled at his chin, and brandished his fists. He was still lifting his knees, he was still raising the dust about his ankles when we turned our backs on him. We left him dancing there, solitary in the veld, a grotesque little figure, capering under a blazing sun. (p. 205)

Ironically, the white man is beaten not through Willem's defiance but through Joseph's subservience. Where the whites are selfishly motivated, Joseph's intense family loyalty - in contrast to the novel's other brother and sister pair - guides his behaviour; where they make fools of themselves, he retains dignity; he alone achieves his aim, but he does so from within his subservience. Winegarten emphasizes the implication in this novel that in the end the African cannot lose:[28] the white man's house will fall down, as Nasie knows, because that is the owner's choice (p. 180). In his essay "James Baldwin and the American Negro" (1961) Jacobson attributes the 'cheerfulness' of blacks in South Africa to their unconscious knowledge that "eventually, and no matter how long their present tribulations may last, they cannot lose the struggle in which they have found themselves."[29] The very romanticism of the statement indicates that Jacobson's interest is not in this struggle; he places black and white in a state of desolate interdependence which has 'neither crisis nor abatement,' highlighted only by moments of ironical contrast between the appearance of absolute power and its limitations. The white man remains *baas*, unable to extract what he wants from the black: Willem's trust, Joseph's gratitude or his fear.

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[28] Winegarten, p. 71.

[29] *Time of Arrival*, p. 193.

But if Jacobson's judgement on his society is apparent in the fate of his characters, it is reinforced by his descriptions of landscape in this novel. Jacobson has said in connection with Scott Fitzgerald that:

> ... to make any important feature of a country truly recognizable, one needs to do more than describe accurately particular physical appearances, or manners, voices, ways of speech; for the details of these are somehow weightless and incoherent unless they are allied to a passionate preoccupation with the social depths which the details both reflect and imply ...[30]

Landscape in *A Dance in the Sun* certainly reflects the bleak depths of South African society as Jacobson perceives it, though 'passionate preoccupation' is perhaps an inappropriate term in this context. The futility of the final scene is anticipated in the opening pages of the novel where the narrator describes the Karoo setting where he and Frank wait for a lift:

> ... As the sun stalked higher, our shade shrank. And the veld was enormous and empty, and the sun seemed to have seized the land, sucking all strength from the thorn trees, and the earth, and our own bodies, leaving husks behind, husks of earth, husks of koppies, the vast empty husk of a desert. (p. 63)

Later, sitting on the van which picks them up, he is struck by a sense of incongruity, centred firstly on the Afrikaner girl's *doek* bearing the words *Café de la Paix*. Already, as Baxter notes, Jacobson is contrasting the civilized world of Europe and the harsh African world of the Karoo:[31]

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[30] "F. Scott Fitzgerald," in *Time of Arrival*, p. 153.

[31] Baxter, p. 44.

> ... I suppose those words were no more odd than they would have been in Johannesburg, but there in the desert, after those hours of waiting, one didn't expect to meet a false souvenir of the Café de la Paix. What did one expect to meet? I don't know. Something dramatic. Lion skins perhaps. Bones bleaching. All we did see of that sort was a dead horse lying by itself in the middle of the low scrub, with nothing near it except the shining railway line. The horse's body had ballooned in the heat, and the four legs were sticking out with a puny stiffness at the corners of the monstrous, swollen body. It was gone in a moment: when I looked back it might have been a rock, an ant-heap, anything. (p. 64)

The only reminder of life in this landscape is distorted and puny: it is both consistent with the harsh veld and in contrast with its scope, just as Fletcher's dance is all the more absurd in relation to its setting - the empty veld and blazing sun. Jacobson's vision is "Hardyesque in its emphasis on the enormities of earth and sky and the comparative insignificance of human life,"[32] and Conrad is an acknowledged early influence.[33] Man is reduced in relation to his environment, nature in relation to the dimensions of earth and sky, as the narrator describes it later that evening:

> Even within my circumscribed sight I could see how forlorn all the growing things were. I could see one taller thorn-tree standing up from the surface of the veld: the light pierced through its rough branches and small spike-like leaves in a thousand places, leaving

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[32] Ibid., p. 45.

[33] "Conrad had a very great influence on me at that time - an influence I can see in *A Dance in the Sun* ..." Hayman, Dan Jacobson in Interview, p. 46.

> it black and tangled and weightless, like something that could be blown away in the first strong gust of wind. And for the rest there were only the low Karroo bushes, barely twelve inches high, each demanding a space of sand on which nothing else grew, each low tuft islanded in a sea of barren sand. Growth here was a bitter and constricted business. The only thing that was not constricted was the sky and the space of earth. There was an immensity of space above my head, and the night gathered above could not hide the great sweep of earth away from my little summit, a lavish generosity of space given unconditionally to drought and silence. (p. 82)

"Growth here was a bitter and constricted business ...": the veld is inimical to the life it is supposed to support. Baxter sees Joseph as "totally at ease in the landscape that so intimidates the narrator,"[34] but even to Joseph the veld that he traverses again and again yields not even a child's grave. At the end of his story the narrator speaks of its "elements of heat, distance, and the difficulty of poverty and ignorance" as the very "earth of the country on which we had built our houses and roads" (p. 169). Geographical details reflect not only the humiliation of human effort but also human indifference in a society so divided that the establishment of understanding between its people is as remote as the establishment of harmony in its landscape. So the narrator recalls stories of hardship heard from black servants as a child: ... "There was as little that we could do about what had happened as we could about the sun that shone charitably in winter and fiercely in summer upon us." (p. 158).

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[34] Baxter, p. 46.

Landscape has always been a prominent feature of South African literature; Stephen Gray calls it "virtually a cliché of South African fiction that it depicts natural forces at work on puny human beings in a way which is degrading to human ambition"[35] and traces an undifferentiated line of landscape tradition from *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) through *A Dance in the Sun* to Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974). The conclusion to a recent collection of essays on South African literature distinguishes more clearly between the differentiated depictions of landscape within this tradition, but makes the point that black and white writers share "a deep desire to accommodate to their landscapes, or to account for their failure."[36] Jacobson accounts for his failure, his sense of alienation from his native landscape first acquired through his childhood vision of its incongruous contrasts. This vision persists both in his fiction and in his non-fiction articles - with the exception of one short story "The Stranger" (1958) in which he attempts to treat the landscape with Lawrentian lyricism.[37] Landscape has its most consistent treatment in *A Dance in the Sun* where its intransigence stays with the narrator even in his daydreams:

> ... Under my eyelids now there ran the white band of the road along which we had come; it was an endless white repetition of sand and corrugations, regular ribs of packed earth under the beating tyres of the car ... Culverts rose to meet us, pebbles flew from our tyres

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[35] *South African Literature: An Introduction* (Cape Town: David Philip and London: Rex Collings, 1979), p. 150.

[36] Sarah Christie, Geoffrey Hutchings and Don Maclennan, *Perspectives on South African Fiction* (Johannesburg: A.D. Donker, 1980), p. 188.

[37] In *A Long Way from London*, pp. 68-90. Another short story, "Two Women," written in the same year and collected in the same volume (pp. 31-50) is the only other work in which he strives for Lawrentian effect.

> sand slewed from the tyres in a spray like shallow water, and at the verge of the road there was an unbroken chain of small brown bushes huddling close to the earth along the line of jackal-proof fence. ... And always, further away, the flat and haggard country over which we raced - gulleys, koppies, the bald stretches of sheet erosion, the low surface of Karroo bushes, rocks, outcrop shining in the sun. Now curving, now straight, our road went across it, and we followed it, hell-for-leather, as if ten demons were behind us, as if beyond the pale, shaking horizon there would be no more koppies, no more gulleys, nor more bald stretches of bone-grey sheet erosion, no more outcrop shining in the sun. A roof shone, a tall steel windmill glinted, a kraal of round boulders lay shattered, no cattle or sheep nearby as if the people had trekked away with their possessions and the country had been abandoned to the sun that stalked above it.... (pp. 126-27)

The dream works as an image of the white man's crazy journey through his African home, neither accepting nor being accepted by it; it also suggests the narrator's desire to pass through it and leave behind both physical conditions and the social conditions these imply. The two are explicitly fused, and the narrator's inability to identify with this country expressed, in a passage following one of his frustrating encounters with Fletcher:

> By that time I felt not only that I had lost curiosity about what was happening in the house - I felt something else too - I wouldn't call it fear - it was nothing as grand as that. Deserted would be a better word. Or lonely. Miles from any place I knew, and with my companion asleep. It was a kind of home-sickness, I felt then, but it was a sickness for a home I had never had, for a single cultivated scene, for a country less empty and violent, for

> people whose manners and skins and languages were fitted peaceably together. The lorry on which we had hitched a lift ... had hurled us towards the man next to whom I stood, and whom I had never seen before, across endless countrysides of heat-seized, silent veld; now we stood together for a moment before the next day would hurl us apart again.... a multi-tongued nation of nomads we seemed to be, across a country too big and silent for us, too dry for cultivation, about which we went on roads like chains. We were caught within it, within this wide, sad land we mined but did not cultivate. (pp. 140-41)

The passage has many echoes in Jacobson's writing. It illustrates a point made at the beginning of this discussion, that the writer's knowledge is expressed as the narrator's discovery, for the weary tone and balanced rhetoric here seem far beyond the petulant naivety of a narrator who could say: "... sometimes one would think it's the whites who are oppressed by their servants, the way they complain about them" (p. 94).

In contrast to the country's wastes, the disorderly nomadic life it supports, the narrator longs for the Western Cape, his destination. His basic unwillingness to fulfil the misguided commitment he and Frank have made to stay with Joseph in Mirredal is expressed in this vision:

> With longing I thought of the journey that still lay ahead of us, through the dry country, through the *dorps* where little whitewashed cafés faced on streets of sand and no one stirred in the mid-day heat, through the empty mountains along a dark blue road, out of the Karroo, and at last into the Western Province. There the country would still be sparse and scattered and sandy, I knew, and the higher slopes of the mountains untouched by the few people who lived in the valleys in isolated white houses; there all would still be pale-coloured, pale

> brown of earth, a pale sky, the faint blue of mountains. But in the valleys that the mountains enclosed like clenched fists of rock, out of the rock a trickle of green would run: young wheat, peaches, pear trees, the low dim vines that would run in regular rows away from the roads along which we would travel. The vines would wheel like spokes in the centre of the turning land, and beyond them the land would always be opening up further; beyond the valleys, beyond the mountains, other bulks of earth would be shrugging away, right to the margin of the sea. (p. 195).

Repeated evocations of fertility and movement - water running out of rock, vines wheeling across fields, the horizon open to the sea - give this passage an almost incantatory effect, but it does not function as an alternative vision of life to that offered in previous landscape descriptions. The narrator cannot forget that the basis of this landscape is as harsh as the rest of the country of which it is a part - the growth still sparse, the people isolated. Physical detail here is not allied to perceived 'social depths' but describes a limited area in which the order and cultivation for which the narrator longs, have been imposed. The very visionary quality of the description suggests that the narrator longs for a stability and richness of cultivation not offered by his country.

The term 'cultivation' is used by Jacobson to denote cultural richness as much as the imposition of order on land. Cultural paucity is another facet of his perception of South African society which he sees reflected in its physical details. Writing on the intellectual conditions of literary activity in the Commonwealth he says of South Africa:

> ... The social fabric has a thinness, a simplicity, a tenuousness which it is difficult to describe ... It is this condition which I have called *the absence of established and highly-developed forms* ... The social tenuousness, the paucity of accepted social usages, is not something abstract, remote from one's everyday perception of the life around one. It might seem an exaggeration to say that one can hear an echo of it in the South African voice and accent, see a reflection of it even in the South African face; but in fact it is no exaggeration at all. And to think of this is to be reminded too of what I would call the imaginative flatness of the country's streets, of its buildings, even of its landscapes which seem merely to have been scratched and eroded, not developed and moulded by the people who live among them.[38]

In *A Dance in the Sun* Jacobson expresses his judgement and rejection of both the socio-political and the cultural conditions of South African life: the society's basic lack of harmony, let alone cultural development, the isolation and humiliation which is the inevitable experience of its members.

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[38] "The Writer in the Commonwealth," pp. 161-62.

CHAPTER III: TWO EXPERIMENTS

In his third and fourth novels - *The Price of Diamonds*[1] and *The Evidence of Love*[2] Jacobson concentrates more than before on individual characters, while still responding to the claims on social conscience inherent in his South African material. In "Fresh Fields" (1961)[3] he tells the story of a South African writer living in England who advises a young compatriot to go back home, and who can himself only write by reworking the South African experience available in the younger writer's work. The story may be Jacobson's wry comment on the fact that an individual's decision to immigrate does not resolve a writer's problems with his background; certainly it was noted with puzzlement by fellow South Africans like C.J. Driver that Jacobson's imagination seemed "tethered to South Africa."[4]

But if South Africa were to continue to be his subject matter, it was clear that after the bald statement of *The Trap* and *A Dance in the Sun* new approaches to it would have to be sought. So the socio-political system symbolized in the first two novels shifts in *The Price of Diamonds* to the background of a Jewish comedy, and is foregrounded by its effect on a 'mixed' love affair in *The Evidence of Love*. In both novels Jacobson moves from the *platteland* as the ideal setting for his dramatization of the relationships between the people of South Africa and the land they share, to the town of Lyndhurst. He pursues the problems of identity

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[1] *The Price of Diamonds* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968). All references in the text are to this edition. First published in 1957.

[2] *The Evidence of Love* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959/1960). All references in the text are to this edition.

[3] In *Through The Wilderness*, pp. 70-83.

[4] "A Somewhere Place," *New Review*, IV (October 1977), 49.

raised in the first two novels, but whereas there the individual's given identity was seen as a trap, here the attempt is made to show that individual self-transcendence is possible: in *The Price of Diamonds* through limited comic regeneration, in *The Evidence of Love* through the protagonists' mutual love and united political act. But the extreme divergence of these two novels is really the link between them, for together they show the writer experimenting with his material, undecided about the extent to which his novels should be vehicles of socio-political comment. A decision on this score has obviously been reached by the time of *The Beginners*, Jacobson's fifth and final South African novel, which exhibits none of the internal inconsistencies of the two under discussion.

The Price of Diamonds.

Gottlieb and Fink sustain their small-time trading partnership in Lyndhurst by mutual insult and pathetic dependence - each partner's presence makes it possible for the other to designate to himself so-called departments of the business, to criticize the other's methods and to shout assertively through the boarding separating their offices. Gottlieb is prosaic; Fink appears to be a man of daring and action who defies the Legemco, the mighty diamond-mining concern which dominates Lyndhurst, though the sum of his defiance is his refusal to walk past its offices. The partners' repartee on the subject points to the question asked in all Jacobson's novels, how to accept the limitations of what one is:

> 'Fink, you are a kind of socialist.'
> 'Gottlieb, you are a slave. With a slave's mind' (p. 35)
>
> 'You have no ambition ... you are content to be a little manufacturer's representative for the rest of your life.'
> 'And for the rest of your life what do you plan to be, Fink?' (p. 37)

Despite his apparent scorn, Gottlieb is impressed by his partner's ideas, and feels himself to be a timid and unimaginative man by comparison. When a box of diamonds is delivered to the office during Fink's absence, Gottlieb sees this as proof of Fink's subversive I.D.B. (Illicit Diamond Buying) activity, and retains the diamonds in order to prove to both Fink and himself his own daring. His attempts to be accepted by the I.D.B. men all fail miserably, and through a crisis in Fink's life he comes to realize the folly of what he is doing.

As a character Gottlieb stands in the long tradition of the *schlemiel*, the loser who can be deemed a hero not because he achieves his aims but because he learns to accept with irony what he is. It is interesting to note that in depicting Jewish life for the first time in a novel, Jacobson again seeks typicality as he had sought it in depicting South African life earlier. This prompts Winegarten's criticism that the characters come too close to the stock figures of Jewish humour.[5] The figure of the *schlemiel* originated in Eastern European Jewish literature as an expression of the ethics of survival, and acquired a significant role in post-war American fiction. It is perhaps not simply coincidental that 1957, the publication year of *The Price of Diamonds*, was also the year that Jacobson took up the first of a number of fellowships he has held at American Universities, though the *schlemiel*-as-immigrant already had a place in his own background. On the personal level, his father was

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[5] "The Novels of Dan Jacobson," p. 71.

at one time a *platteland* storekeeper like those visited by Gottlieb and Fink; and on a more general level, the American Jewish immigrant experience as described by Ruth Wisse has parallels in South Africa:

> ... somehow, the policies of tolerance and the slow, steady climb into the middle, even upper-middle class, have not prevented Jews in America ... from sharing many of the insecurities of their European forefathers. As experience soon showed, greater freedom encouraged a geographic and economic mobility which necessarily weakened communal and family cohesion. Not having to worry about annihilation, the community was threatened by corrosion from within, called variously acculturation, accommodation, or assimilation ...[6]

This is Gottlieb's world too: he has fought, as an immigrant, to establish himself but his son has left home and neglects him, and no sense remains of Jewish faith or culture. Under these circumstances, modern *schlemiels* like Herzog and Rosie Lieber[7] become embodiments of the capacity to love, and Gottlieb, whose name like theirs plays on the idea of 'heart', is intended to fulfil a similar role: he resists blackmail and finally throws his box of diamonds down Lyndhurst's big hole in order to assert the importance of honesty and loyalty. His triumph, like that of all *schlemiels*, is partial and personal. At the end of the novel, Gottlieb's relationship with his wife and son is as unsatisfactory as it was before, and the circumstances of his life have changed not at all, but he and Fink have learnt to accept their own and one another's limitations.

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[6] *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971) p. 70.

[7] Ibid., pp. 82-83. The references are to Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) and Grace Paley, "Goodbye and Good Luck," in *Great Jewish Short Stories*, ed. Saul Bellow (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963), pp. 392-402.

This partial triumph makes the novel "just as inconclusive as its predecessors ..."[8] or in the harsher judgement of one reviewer: "After a promising ... start ... it is a pity that the whole performance should be so utterly futile."[9]

Indeed, though much of the humour in *The Price of Diamonds* is successful, and the work has been acclaimed as a comedy,[10] it is not surprising that it is Jacobson's only comic work. The vision of life underlying the novel is not conducive to regeneration, and if one cannot believe in that then Gottlieb's process of self-discovery does appear to be rather futile. Decter says of *The Price of Diamonds:*

> ... Mr Jacobson works almost as much by a principle of evading the "wrong" objects and perceptions as by finding the right ones ... clearly what he is pushing away, excluding at every moment he writes is a chaos he does not yet feel adequate to - the chaos of things gratuitously ugly and mean and of the feelings in himself for which he has no respect ...[11]

But his vision of gratuitous ugliness and meanness is apparent just below the surface of the comedy, undermining its resolution as it had undermined van Schoor's tragic status at the end of *The Trap*. The absurd, voracious need for recognition, the abuse of power over others, deceptions hidden in humility - in short the ways in which a man can fall victim to others and fail in his own aims, which are explored in

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[8] Decter, "Novelist of South Africa," p. 206.

[9] Review in *Spectator*, 20 December 1957, p. 879, quoted by Myra Yudelman, *Dan Jacobson: a bibliography* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, Department of Bibliography, Librarianship and Typography, 1962), p. 2.

[10] See, e.g., anon. rev., *New York Times*, 20 April 1958, p. 35.

[11] Decter, p. 208.

the earlier and intensified in the later novels, are present here too. Jacobson's novels demonstrate a process of self-discovery on the writer's part as regards this vision of life. In *The Evidence of Love* he pushes it away and attempts another form of regeneration, through heroics rather than comedy. But in *The Beginners* he seems to recognize the implications of his own vision: this novel is a catalogue of attempts of self-transcendence which fail, an exhaustive statement which frees the writer into the powerful, unambiguous exploration of the traps of individual identity in his later characters. They embody the deceit and viciousness in the observed world rather than presenting personal transcendence within it.

In *The Price of Diamonds* one's sense of this world accumulates in minor incidents. Like Maclachlan and Fletcher before him, Gottlieb compensates for his own uncertainty by bullying those in his power, and his timid, neglected wife Riva serves as a butt for his frustrations. Perversely she reacts to Gottlieb in precisely the ways that he warns against, unconsciously fulfilling his perverse desire that she should thus expose herself to his anger and ridicule. So when he prefaces his story about the diamonds with an injunction to Riva not to worry about them, she immediately does so:

> Gottlieb banged his hand on the table. 'I *told* you not to worry! And now look at you! Take your hand out of your mouth - there's nothing to make you start biting, biting. I am not going to jail,' Gottlieb said slowly and emphatically, his hands flat on the table. 'Don't you believe me?'
>
> 'I don't know what to believe,' Riva replied, her teeth still tugging at her fingernail. Riva hadn't been a nail-biter until Gottlieb had one day remarked that if there was one thing he could not stand it was a woman who bit her fingernails. He happened to say the same thing the next day; the day after he had had to say it in particular reproof of his wife and not merely as a general observation about the state of his feelings. (p. 21)

An earlier exchange between Gottlieb and Fink, though humorously exploiting the cliché of Jewish family pride, shows another aspect of what can only be called Gottlieb's cruelty:

> And when he wanted to goad Fink, Gottlieb always inquired after Fink's daughters. 'What has happened to Althea?' he would ask. 'She married the lawyer?'
>
> Fink would know what was coming. 'Yes'
>
> 'He's doing well?'
>
> 'He's making a living.'
>
> Gottlieb would think this over for a moment of two.
>
> 'And Lynda? She married the doctor?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> 'And how is his practice?'
>
> 'Very good. An excellent practice in a good suburb.'
>
> 'And Claire, her husband is also making a living?'
>
> 'A first-class living.'
>
> 'That's a good thing to hear. Three daughters, all married to good men, all making a living.' Gottlieb would nod, Gottlieb would suck at his tea, absently Gottlieb would deliver his blow.
>
> 'I haven't seen them for a long time. I'd like to see them again. Are they coming down to Lyndhurst soon?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> 'Oh - so?'
>
> Gottlieb would smile, Gottlieb would know he was on top.
>
> 'When?'
>
> 'I don't know,' Fink would shout. 'I don't know their plans.'
>
> But if Fink had been really angered by Gottlieb's inquiries, he would tell Gottlieb, 'They're coming down when your Irvine comes down. On exactly the same train, that's when they're coming down.' (pp. 31-32)

In the relationship between the policeman Groenewald and his boss Conroy, Gottlieb's attempt to rectify a distorted image of himself is mirrored. Groenewald is baby-faced, lonely in Lyndhurst; Conroy impassive, threatening, dryly confident, another bully who so demoralizes Groenewald that he sets out like Gottlieb to 'regain his sense of himself.' Like Gottlieb's, his humiliations are painful, his compensations nasty. The exaggerated gaucheness of his attempt to blackmail Gottlieb does not obscure this. Even a character like Miss Scholtz, the 'pudding' secretary who pines for male attention, is overburdened by a family of siblings and ashamed of her home, and is an object of pity as much as of humour. The 'happy ending' represented by her proposed marriage to Groenewald is qualified by the fact, which Gottlieb feels it his duty to point out to his secretary, that their love is based on Groenewald's deception of her and of his superiors, while pigfarming, as the goal of the happy couple, confirms their ungainliness and is a futher implied humiliation for Gottlieb, the Jew who finances it.

But if Gottlieb's partial and personal triumph carries less weight in the novel than the humiliation which pervades the world created around him, a serious fault of the novel is that the personal nature of this triumph is intruded upon by the writer's socio-political comments. As regards his characters' Jewishness Jacobson's choice of immigrant Jews deliberately avoids the self-examination as *South Africans* that the characters in his other South African novels undergo. Decter, who sees the problem examined in this novel as that of a man's relationship to himself, says that *The Price of Diamonds* "represents a kind of relaxation into comedy and an abstraction of the author's problem,"[12]

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[12] Decter, p. 205.

in other words the problem of the trapped identity is abstracted out of the social context of which, in the earlier novels, it was seen as a manifestation, and explored in the private context of a relationship between two men. It is true that Gottlieb, in his wanderings around downtown Lyndhurst, feels himself to be "... a stranger, a curiosity to the others there, most of whom he suspected of regarding him as an object of scorn, kindness, anti-semitism, or help which he did not need" (p. 61); but he is not rejected by this underground world on the basis of race. It is significant that members of races which are objects of social or legal prejudice in South Africa - the Portuguese Aporto and the Indian Bannerjee- are included in the I.D.B. brotherhood, from which Gottlieb is excluded both by their professional jealousy and by his obvious incompetence in their field. It is, rather, on prejudice against blacks that Jacobson comments.

Two of the funniest scenes, both early on in the novel, concern the race issue: when Miss Scholtz discusses with Gottlieb the mysterious box which has been delivered to the office, and later when Gottlieb's attempts to bury it are frustrated by his 'houseboy's' automatic impulse to serve his *baas:*

> 'Perhaps it's Amos's.' Miss Scholtz laughed at the thought of Amos, the native driver-cum-office-boy, having a parcel of any sort. 'Perhaps he wants me to post it for him.' The thought that Amos might want to *post* his parcel made Miss Scholtz laugh again.
>
> 'Amos is capable of posting his own parcels,' Gottlieb said, looking over his glasses.
>
> 'He's clever all right,' Miss Scholtz agreed immediately in an aggrieved tone ... Now Amos's having a parcel became a source of irritation, not amusement. 'What should I do with it?' she asked. 'He shouldn't go leaving his messy

little parcels all over my desk. It's cheek.' Miss Scholtz looked at the parcel with a grimace. 'I don't even know what's in it. It might be anything. Something dirty. You know what they're like. It might be ... medicine, *their* medicine. Teeth, and other things like that,' Miss Sholtz said darkly, 'for medicine.'

'Is Amos sick?'

Miss Sholtz gave a little cry of laughter. 'Oh, Mr Gottlieb, you do think of funny things.' (p. 13)

... Gottlieb got hold of a spade and chose one among several flower-beds near the fence that would benefit from a little digging-up. And he set to work; but before he could throw a little box into the special little hole that he had prepared for it among the rest of the sandy, turned-up earth, Benjamin, the house-boy, came running from the back of the house to see if he could help his master.

'I want to dig,' Gottlieb told him brusquely.

But Benjamin lingered nearby, his hands reaching forward involuntarily when Gottlieb struggled with a particularly heavy spadeful of earth, or when he struck a rock and jarred his hands and shoulders. Solemnly, Gottlieb dug; wonderingly, Benjamin - whom Gottlieb felt he could not send abruptly away without arousing suspicion - watched Gottlieb at this unaccustomed exercise.

'Please, baas, I will dig for the baas.'

Gottlieb straightened himself over the spade, and felt the evening breeze touch with a sharp chill the sweat down his back. I'm digging because I like it,' Gottlieg said, struggling for breath. 'You can go.'

Benjamin did not go. He sank on his haunches, his black knees projecting from his khaki shorts. '*Au* baas,' he said admiringly, 'the baas is working too hard.' (p. 27)

The absurdity of racial inequality and prejudice is shown through the writer's comic focus on Miss Scholtz's ignorance and Gottlieb's ineptitude. The ironical distance from which the writer here regards the social situation conflicts with the earnest note elsewhere when he insists on telling the reader about it. Less obtrusively than in *A Dance in the Sun*, Jacobson again reminds his reader that he remains critical of the South African situation, despite the fact that his novel does not concentrate on its issues. The quarrel between Gottlieb's maid Sylvia and a black man serves as an example. When Riva tells Gottlieb of the quarrel he says:

> 'That girl - the way she carries on you'd think she was the Queen of England. At least the Queen of England. She's a coloured woman, she's got no business going around calling other people kaffirs, and kaffirs, and again kaffirs.'
>
> 'But she's educated.'
>
> 'And that's changed the colour of her skin?'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'Well then.'
>
> Riva said distantly: I don't think that's very kind of you Manfred.'
>
> 'Look, Sylvia's been with us a long time, I'm happy with her, she cooks well, everything. But also I like people to be what they are, not to try to be what they aren't.' (p. 19)

Gottlieb's final statement ironically anticipates his own attempt to be what he is not; the political point implicitly made by the incident is that racial prejudice exists not only between white and black but between racially oppressed groups as well. This is later reinforced by Sylvia when she gives Gottlieb her own version of the story:

> ... Gottlieb cut the recital off by asking her why she had called the offending boy a lazy kraal kaffir.
>
> 'But that's what he is,' Sylvia replied. Her brown face laboured under the little serving-maid's cap as she said, 'I am nearly white, master, the master knows what I am. And the missus too. But these kaffirs don't have respect for us.'
>
> 'I am sorry,' Gottlieb said, and signified that Sylvia could go. (p. 26)

Jacobson interprets:

> A little later Gottlieb heard more cheerful voices from the kitchen, where the two women were busy over the dress. Had the dress been designed and made in Paris expressly for Sylvia, in Lyndhurst she could still not have sat in it on a park-bench, gone to a cinema, ridden in the front seat of a bus; but she would clearly, gladly lock upon others the doors that had been locked upon her. 'So it goes,' Gottlieb said aloud, touching the box in his pocket through the cloth of his trousers. (p. 26)

Presented as Gottlieb's thought, this protest against racial discrimination does not ring true, for, as his previous dialogue with Riva reveals, he accepts the significance of skin colour; it is because he considers Sylvia no better than 'a Kaffir' that he objects to her calling the black man by this name, not because he finds the category itself offensive. The writer's comment is again imposed on the action when Gottlieb, driving Fink home, bolts away from a stop street and forces a black cyclist into the gutter at the side of the road. To the extent that the cyclist's being black is relevant to the incident, it is taken up by Fink in order to make Gottlieb's driving seem more deplorable: "... Have you got a word to say against my driving? Do I chase poor Kaffirs

into the gutter?" Jacobson concludes unnecessarily: "... But when the white men drove past him he could do nothing but smile propitiatingly at them from the gutter." (p. 48-49)

The intrusiveness of such details is more obvious in an incident during Gottlieb's haunting of downtown Lyndhurst in search of contacts for his diamonds:

> There were humiliations for Gottlieb. There was the time, for instance, when he was accosted by Thomas, the coloured signwriter ... who on seeing Gottlieb outside the Pathways Bar came running to him from the coloured entrance, crying, 'Your worship, Mr Gottlieb, what the hell do you do here?' ... in no time a small crowd of white and coloured children, women, and drunks had gathered before the bar to watch Thomas repeatedly bowing low to Gottlieb as he shouted, 'I'm glad to see your worship again. Such a surprise, but welcome, welcome, welcome your worship.' Thomas swayed and yelled; he crouched low and came forward, weaving from side to side, snapping his fingers, driving Gottlieb towards the entrance for whites. Now he was offering his services to Gottlieb. 'Reliable, your worship, always sober, much too ambitious.' He lunged again at Gotlieb, but always with a snake-like, dangerous servility of movement. 'Overtime,' he yelled, 'summertime, winter-time, what do I care? We only live once.' Gottlieb went into the 'European' bar, and there Thomas could not follow him; and when Gottlieb went out again he was accompanied by a self-appointed bodyguard of two young men in shirt-sleeves, whose sensibilities had been offended by this raucous non-white voice entering the only way it could into their sanctuary. Gottlieb told them for God's sake to leave the drunken fellow alone, which they did only after Thomas had convincingly shown them that drunk though he was he could run faster than any of them. A block away Thomas stood on the corner and shouted, 'To hell with you your worship.' (pp. 61-62)

Thomas bitterly exposes a system under which he must rely on ingratiating himself to whites: his attack is not aimed at Gottlieb as an individual, but as a white employer. As such it is less pointed and particularized humiliation than Gottlieb's other encounters with Lyndhurst's underground, in the context of which it occurs. Jacobson attempts to integrate this racial incident as one of Gottlieb's experiences by having him gradually convince himself that "the incident with Thomas ... had been dangerous, dramatic, something that a man like Fink, for instance, would never have been able to deal with." (p. 62); but certain details remain over-explicit: the irony, for example, in speaking of the 'sensibilities' of the white toughies, of the bar as a 'sanctuary,' of Thomas' 'non-white' voice. As a South African one gets the point - and is reminded of Jacobson's warning against the dangers of writing for an unfamiliar audience which may not as easily do so (see p. 52 above).

Critical expectation that a South African novel by a liberal writer like Dan Jacobson must of necessity be socio-politically concerned has led to John F. Cronin's condemnation of *The Price of Diamonds* as "the literary equivalent of an eggless omelette" - a South African novel not intimately concerned with race,[13] and also to the very different assertion by Wade that the novel is indeed, like the previous two, a social allegory:

> ... The inherently worthless metals that the South African earth is so rich in, that act so magnetically upon men, corrupt their affections, distort their relationships with each other, lead them to bind one another with chains - these metals lie at the root of the political tyranny, the absence of freedom that characterises South African society, while symbolising the artificiality of the relationship between the men they attract and the land itself.[14]

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[13] "Writer versus Situation: Three South African Novelists," *Studies*, LVI (Spring 1967), 79.

[14] "Apollo, Dionysus," p. 60.

Winegarten too, while dismissing the characters as stock figures of Jewish humour, salvages the novel for the cause of social criticism by extracting as its central image "the unproductiveness, sordid decay and moral corruption caused by the diamond industry. The implication is that the price of diamonds, as it were the very root cause of South Africa, is much too high."[15] Historically the assertion is questionable, but in terms of the novel the search for social symbolism is inappropriate: the Legemco is no more than the object of Fink's absurd sallies, the I.D.B. men minor caricatures, not representatives of moral decay. Inflation of *The Price of Diamonds* as a critique of South African society ignores its internal inconsistencies on this score. It is in his next novel that Jacobson attempts finally to allay the promptings of social conscience.

The Evidence of Love.

The Evidence of Love is Jacobson's miscegenation novel. Consideration of other South African works on this topic - William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* (1926), Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953), Nadine Gordimer's *Occasion for Loving* (1963), André P. Brink's *Kennis van die Aand* (1973), and Athol Fugard's *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act* (1974) - reveals that an essential common ingredient is not only the negative belief which Jacobson clearly shares, that the South African system is wrong, but also an affirmative belief in the value of the love relationship which defies this system - or in Paton's novel, the value of the search for a love relationship even though it leads to the hero's 'fall.' The system is criticized in these works through the pathos of a private relationship into which it intrudes.

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[15] Winegarten, p. 71.

In his novel Jacobson strives for pathos by affirming a love relationship and having the lovers deliberately confront the Immorality Act. The resolution in both love and political action of the two main characters' problems of identity sets *The Evidence of Love* apart from Jacobson's other novels. Where elsewhere any attempt at black-white understanding, be it van Schoor's familiarity in *The Trap*, the narrator's paternalistic liberalism in *A Dance in the Sun*, or the radical politics touched on in *The Beginners*, is rendered futile or suspect by what Jacobson sees as the basic impossibility of such understanding and the selfish motivation behind the attempts, in this novel a 'coloured'[16] man and a white girl reach full intimacy and stand together against the system. The political defeatism of the first two novels is thus reversed, where the characters were isolated from one another in the first two novels and attained only partial resolution in the third - Gottlieb and Fink could not manage anything as sensational as an embrace (*The Price of Diamonds*, p. 168) - in *The Evidence of Love* the total affirmation of love is achieved. Nowhere else in Jacobson's novels does love allow a character to transcend the loneliness of his individual identity: it brings disillusionment in *The Beginners* and is impossible or perverted in the later three novels. The failure of these attempted resolutions is confirmed by the fact that, despite its controversial topic, *The Evidence of Love* is the only one of Jacobson's novels that is out of print.

As has recently been the case with Brink's latest novel *A Dry White Season* (1979), the controversiality of the subject matter has led to uncritical acceptance of *The Evidence of Love* as meaningful social comment.

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[16] As the term is considered derogatory, it will be used in quotation marks throughout. The alternative expression 'so-called coloured' becomes clumsy.

The title of one article: "Battle of the Books: A Critical Survey of Books By and About Negroes Published in 1960"[17] reveals its bias in this respect. Again Jacobson's conviction about the protest and resolution he presents can be questioned on the basis of bad inconsistencies in what the novel is saying, which will for this reason be examined in some detail. After the dead-end reached in *The Trap* and the narrow scope of *The Price of Diamonds*, Jacobson seeks a wider focus on the South African problem. He removes Kenneth and Isabel from Lyndhurst to London where their relationship can develop without the harrassment of the system and where Isabel can remain ignorant of the fact that Kenneth is 'coloured,' then returns them to South Africa for a single political act after which they will settle in England. The problem which continues to interest the writer, that of individual identity trapped within given confines, is considered by way of the question whether or not a politically aware South African can choose to live a private life. This is a theme of Gordimer's work, particularly of her most recent novel, *Burger's Daughter* (1979). Though like Kenneth's her decision is not satisfactorily explained, Rosa Burger returns to South Africa leaving behind her in Europe the love and ease which her social conscience has finally prevented her from enjoying. That Kenneth has it both ways, achieving both pathos and ultimate freedom, contributes to the impression that *The Evidence of Love*, for all the seriousness of the issues it raises, is a dishonest novel. The writer strains moreover for effect in his use for the first time of English local colour in a novel, in his description of Kenneth's suffering in

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[17] Nick Aaron Ford, *Phylon*, XXII (Summer 1961), 119-34.

London, in his attempts through the first-person narrator to heighten the reader's expectation of the lovers' doom, and in the final trial scene. Where Jacobson's urge to say the right thing about South Africa took the form of intrusive comment in *A Dance in the Sun* and *The Price of Diamonds*, here it is implied in his very choice of subject matter.

The novel opens with an entry in Kenneth Makeer's diary, in which he relates a Kafkaesque vision of the breakdown of normal trust between people, through the experience of an ordinary British commuter whose acquaintances at the railway station one morning inexplicably turn on him. Humiliation at their hands corrodes his sense of his own identity:

> '... You are a citizen, a husband, a father, a man of position; but who would believe it when they see the blood and the filth on your face, and your torn clothes; who would believe it when they hear the jeers of the crowd and see the fingers pointing at you; who would believe it when they hear the noises that you are making? ... Do you believe that you are a respectable and innocent man when you have exhausted your rage and have exhausted even your own terror, and in guilt and shame creep away on your hands and knees, hoping only that the crowd will let you go without further jeers, kicks, spittle on your bent and exposed back?
>
> 'Do you believe that under such circumstances you would still know who you are? And the next day?' (p. 12)

The background against which this outburst occurs is only later understood: Kenneth is a 'coloured' whose loyalties are divided between his people's cause and his personal needs. His sense of mission to uplift his people suffers in the impersonality of London, and collapses on his South African benefactress' death. In the resulting identity crisis

which specifically concerns his being a South African 'coloured' in London, it is quite implausible that he would, in a private diary, write about identity in a self-consciously British way, with Little Johnny, Jones, Smith and cornflakes as his characters and props (pp. 7-9). The conclusion to Kenneth's entry relates the incident he has described to actual human suffering in the rest of the world. Having referred particularly to the Holocaust, he continues:

> 'And what happened once, during a war, can happen again. Do you suppose that it isn't happening now? And I don't speak only of my own country, South Africa, or of the Southern states of the United States, or of a country like India where there are men so degraded that their shadows render uneatable the food of other men, or of those progressive countries where people plead sincerely for a bullet in the head to punish them for crimes they have never committed. For good or evil, with less violence or more, with smiles and handshakes and frowns and grimaces, as well as blows and cries and kisses, what I have spoken of here happens to all of us, all the days of our lives, wherever we may happen to live.' (p. 13)

Nowhere else in the novel does Kenneth express concern for the suffering caused by the war and experienced in the rest of the world, nor is it shown to have a significant bearing on his life. The general cynicism about trust which he expresses in this chapter is, moreover, not borne out in Kenneth's private life, where he is emotionally vulnerable to his family, to Miss Bentwisch and to Isabel. Jacobson introduces a sense of foreboding and attempts to invest Kenneth's experience with universality, at the beginning of the novel, by having him express a view which is obviously

of significance to the writer but inappropriate to Kenneth. His outburst can be contrasted with the far more concise and less sentimental expression of a similar idea by Jacobson's latest, thoroughly cynical hero, Josef Baisz. Returning to his home town as an adult, Josef remarks:

> ... Even the little school I had attended now seemed to me to have been a far better training-ground for life in the metropolis than I could ever have guessed it would be.
>
> How swiftly, for example, the word used to spread through the schoolyard that so-and-so was in trouble with the bully of the school; how pale the offender went when he realised what was in store for him; how vainly he looked for response from the rest of us to his sick, ingratiating smile; how sorry we felt for him, and how glad that it was his turn to cop it and not ours; with what terror and zeal everyone would join in the last mad pursuit and capture, once the signal was given.
>
> I saw it many times: in marble-floored places, in dusty offices packed with filing-cabinets and ink-spattered desks, in summer resorts above the Great Lecke Lake, where our masters had their country cottages.
>
> (*The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, p. 82)

Wade remarks of the use of the journal entry at the beginning of *The Evidence of Love* that:

> From the point of view of characterisation the chapter fails quite simply because it could not have been written in anybody's diary ... The total absence of particularity, of the sense of an individual voice in this chapter prevents it from making its impact at this or any other relevant moment in the plot: and the parable remains a chilling story of our times without in any way ... meshing into the texture of the novel.[18]

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[18] Wade, p. 72.

The journal's companion device, the first-person narrator who reads it, is similarly unjustified in terms of his function in the novel as a whole. It is never clear who he is, nor how he comes to be well-acquainted with Kenneth and Isabel: he is only a casual acquaintance of Kenneth's at the beginning of the novel, and knows nothing about Isabel on her return from South Africa; nor is it clear how he comes to know the details of the trial. Rather than functioning as a consistent observer, the narrator disappears for most of the novel, and is most apparent when he intrudes, as in the discussion in Chapter VIII on what it means to be a South African coming to London. The narrator describes the experience of recognizing what as a colonial one has always read about but never known, as an experience shared by all English-speaking South Africans who come to England as visitors, immigrants or students. For Kenneth, however, the crucial experience of being in England is, at least initially, his new freedom from discrimination, to do as he pleases (see, e.g. p. 130). The mystical-cultural voice of England which the narrator describes is heard by those to whom it has already been able to speak "... in books; in the pictures that were on the walls of their rooms, their schools, their galleries; in films; on the radio; through the mouths of their teachers and the memories of parents, the letters of those who preceded them here" (p. 141) - very little of which Kenneth has known. As in the opening extract, the fascination with the details of British life is Jacobson's own, and it has been described less rhetorically and more appropriately, elsewhere.[19]

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[19] See the essays "Time of Arrival" and "Settling in England," footnoted on pp. 27 & 19 above.

Jacobson's exposure of the selfish motivation which underlies and undermines white liberalism in South Africa is harsher in *The Evidence of Love* than it was in *A Dance in the Sun*, and anticipates the writer's exhaustive demonstration in *The Beginners* of the futility of any attempt to sublimate the individual self in social activity. This is conveyed in minor details like his sarcastic description of the student helpers at Kenneth's school who "thought of themselves as 'liberals, intellectuals,' 'scientists'" and were "anxious to do something for what they mockingly called 'the cause'" (p. 84); but it is primarily Miss Bentwisch who espouses the liberal cause and demonstrates its inadequacy. Guilt, shame, the desire for expiation and gratitude prompted the two young men in *A Dance in the Sun*; Miss Bentwisch's liberalism acts as compensation for her personal isolation, as an escape from herself. She tells Isabel:

> 'Wait, Isabel, wait until you've lived as long as I have. Wait until you've learned the boredom and disgust of living inside yourself, with no escape from it, never any - just being what you are, day after day. And knowing yourself! - not like the others, who live within themselves and who know so little that they think themselves interesting admirable even. But knowing, knowing what you are: you couldn't bear it. You must live through others, you must live selflessly, always putting away what you are, otherwise ... you will find yourself in a prison, the narrowest, most stifling prison in the world.' (p. 66).

The prison of self is a basic notion in Jacobson's view of the human condition, the implied discovery of his earlier, and conscious condition

of his later characters. Miss Bentwisch's attempt to escape it is not as selfless as this outburst may suggest. Earlier in the conversation she says, revealingly: "People don't want to understand what the rewards are when you work for others"(p. 65); and assures Isabel: "I don't want to win the reputation of being a philanthropist, that would be the easiest reward possible" (p. 66). Isabel earnestly points out the discrepancies in her mentor's viewpoint, voicing Jacobson's major theme: "So it comes back to the self in the end" (p. 65), and later: "But there's still the reward. A harder reward is one you value more, that's all" (p. 66).

Miss Bentwisch's reaction to her young friend's inadvertent criticism is one of stern displeasure, in keeping with the autocratic character she is shown to be. She regards her good works as duties and requires that those she helps should 'deserve helping' - a rigid and patronizing requirement which allows for her unfair dismissal of Kenneth's brother as worthless; it allows too for disregard of Kenneth's human needs in her faulty idealization of his "fine spirit" (p. 101). She attempts to infuse Kenneth with a desire to 'live through others' as she has done. But as her own bitterness, loneliness, manipulation of Isabel and fear of futility reveal, emotions and selfish desires cannot be sublimated.

Kenneth and Isabel both experience the peculiar South African dilemma, which faced Jacobson as a writer, that the claims of a society as politically sensitive as our own inhibit private experience. Isabel, true to Miss Bentwisch's influence,[20] concerns herself when she leaves school with

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[20] Wade (pp. 64-73) draws an interesting parallel between Miss Bentwisch and Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* in terms of her influence on her two protégés.

charity work among the 'coloured' population of Lyndhurst and with party-political organization - and soon has a sense of the sterility of these activities. The change in her behaviour on leaving South Africa is so marked as to constitute a shedding of the identity she had acquired in her life in Lyndhurst. On the boat to England, for example, she enters out of "a kind of horrid curiosity" (p. 203) into an affair with a married man whom she does not even like. After meeting Kenneth and abruptly terminating her work, Isabel does not even attempt to find another job, let alone one of the philanthropic kind she had had in Lyndhurst: her intensely private relationship with Kenneth, lacking even the context of mutual friends, replaces the social concern which had occupied her. Jacobson's point here, as throughout *The Beginners*, is that social concern is never really altruistic, but arises from the individual's need to be involved with other people, which can be fulfilled in personal ways.

In Kenneth's case the strength of his personal desire for the education, culture and ease closed to him as a 'coloured' makes itself felt early in his life; simultaneously he feels the "guilt of betrayal and abandonment" (p. 36) towards his father and brother, who would not be able to share in the fulfilment of his ambition were he to try, as he could, for white. He is faced with a dilemma concerning his very identity, what he is and what he can become. This is already clear in an early incident when he is helping his father build a wall for Mr. Last. The white man remarks, with reference to Kenneth: "... Let's hope he won't ... waste his time with nonsense. Do what he has to do. Live the kind of life he has to live. There's no other for him. There's no other for any of us " (p. 35), to which Kenneth's response is a rare outburst of bitterness about his life:

> '... It's a hard life, yes, it's a hard life for him, I can see how hard it is, in his big house, with his big car, with all his money - it's the only life he'll ever have - oh, oh - that's the way it is, oh yes, oh sure, he understands, the old bastard. So go back to your bricks, you bloody *Hotnot*, it's the only life you'll ever have.' (p. 46)

Isabel Last's relation of the incident to Miss Bentwisch leads to the latter's becoming Kenneth's benefactor: his rebellion against what he is forced to be thus leads to the opportunity she offers him to become something else, in contrast to Willem's fate when he tries to defy the confines of his identity as a black man, or Joseph's acceptance of these. She confronts him with a series of emotionally charged evocations of blacks' suffering, and rhetorical questions (pp. 103-5), finally overwhelming him with her offer of financial help to fulfil a mission to his people. But at this stage it is already clear that her fanaticism is unrealistic. Kenneth's most intense experience during her monologue is his sensual appreciation of the objects in her sitting-room, which represent the lifestyle to which Miss Bentwisch's theories are only an opening:

> ... He hardly knew himself when he sat in a room with tall hanging curtains of blue and gold drawn aside at the windows, a white moulded ceiling high above, a great stone-blue vase in the middle of a table, and all the colours in the room glinting again from mirrors and the glass doors of cabinets. ... (p. 104)

And after her solemn conviction that he would be 'free of himself' one sees Kenneth's self-absorbed elation as he runs home to the brother and father whose hurt, humble, forgiving reception of his news leaves no doubt that Kenneth's choice is a personal choice against his own people,

whatever its idealistic overlay. From London he writes regularly to Miss Bentwisch in order to authenticate his life in terms of the 'mission' from which he feels increasing distance, and on her death experiences guilt-ridden exhilaration at his anonymity in London, his freedom from the fulfilment of external expectations. His confusion about his own identity intensifies.

In this state Kenneth sets out to find Isabel Last whom he knows to be the original cause of his contact with Miss Bentwisch, and also in London. He confesses in his journal:

> 'I found her, all right - the one to whom I came to restore to me my own sense of identity, to tell me again who I was. It could have been so simple, I could so easily have won from her what I wanted: recognition, affirmation, restoration. And instead ... I held my tongue. I said nothing of who I was. I watched her. Why? Why?
>
> 'No, I can't acquit myself. If I had not been filled with self-contempt I would have said to her, "My name is Kenneth Makeer. I come from Lyndhurst. I am one of Miss Bentwisch's protégés: she sent me to London, so that I might learn all I was capable of learning, the better to carry on the struggle of my people in South Africa ... Instead I gave her no chance. I saw to it that there could be no help of any kind from her. I wanted to be where I am now, because I believed I deserved no better: in this mess, the smell, I wanted this taste in my mouth nothing else.' (pp. 170-71)

The experience of humiliation and the desire to inflict it is a gauge of self-discovery in Jacobson's work; here as in the later novels, it is masochistically sought. Even after he has come to love Isabel, Kenneth experiences violent and degrading racial hatred towards her:

> Let Isabel Last have burned with ... humiliations, ached with impotence; let her spirit have been tortured, mangled, degraded endlessly - and then let her show her scruples, when she at last had one of these torturers, manglers, humiliators at her mercy, as now he had her! White bitch, white slut, white whore, white fool, white female, *Witgoed*, he called her: lie down, let me prance over you, with my blue balls and my brown c——, my brown hands and brown blood.
>
> These bouts of anger and hatred horrified and exalted him, left him feeling weak, shattered inwardly; they came again and again, making him caper about his room, or stand with a distorted face in front of the mirror in his wardrobe, mimicking Isabel's face when she lifted it to kiss him or be kissed ... (pp. 195-196)

The passage is a condemnation of the social oppression from which his feeling arises, but the rhetorical relish of the writing is itself distasteful. What can be seen in the context of Jacobson's work as a whole as a fascination for forms of humiliation, here gains the kudos of political protest, with words like 'tortured' and 'mangled' exploiting an emotionally loaded issue. A. Alvarez' comment on Jacobson's language in an otherwise favourable review of *The Evidence of Love* applies to this passage:

> ... Jacobson commands great eloquence and he uses it to raise the necessary intensity. But eloquence is a tricksy gift: handled wrongly it topples into rhetoric. Jacobson's style, like his hero, may have 'the knack of exciting solicitude,' but at times he falls victim to it ...[21]

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[21] "The Difficulty of Being South African," *New Statesman*, 4 June 1960, p. 828.

What Kenneth's sexual hatred does make clear is that his relationship with Isabel faces a challenge at this stage: he must work through his bitterness, accept who he is and trust Isabel enough to tell her; she must understand the revenge he needs to take, and their relationship must provide them with an understanding of one another beyond the racial categories with which they grew up. It is a challenge that Jacobson fails to meet. Instead he resolves their relationship by a contrived rift when it is revealed to Isabel who Kenneth is. Their behaviour becomes quite unrealistic, particularly as regards the colour issue. Isabel, liberal though she is, has related to 'coloureds' in South Africa on a no more equal basis than that of philanthropy, and Kenneth has been described capering around his room in a paroxysm of racial revenge, yet now that his identity is revealed they both coyly deny the significance of colour as an issue between them. Kenneth feels that he cannot tell Isabel about his past because after so many weeks of lies she may despise him: "(And beneath that fear there was another, which made his skin shrink in patches, as if it were exposed, and then glow unbearably: the fear that she would turn away from him in disgust because of what he was.)" (p. 197). So palpable a fear, concerning so intrinsic a part of him, makes an inappropriate parenthetical aside. Isabel, after she has discovered the truth, repeatedly asks herself why Kenneth had lied to her; she is able to "sympathise passionately" with what she imagines to be his desire to change the lives of his people (p. 220) but discounts the scar of humiliation that years of experience of that life must have set on him personally:

> Once only did it occur to Isabel that the man had lied out of shame and fear, thinking that she might find him repugnant if she knew he was coloured; and no sooner did the thought come than it was thrust aside as unworthy of him, unworthy of her. (p. 221)

So instead of having them face this crucial issue together, Jacobson bases upon it the misunderstanding which occurs at this point: imagining that Kenneth has sacrificed his 'mission' because of his relationship with a white woman, Isabel resolves to give him up, telling him: "I know what you were before you met me ... And I know what you must be again." (p. 222). He takes this to mean something like 'a coloured must know his place' and is duly, agonizingly disillusioned in her:

> 'You know————!' Kenneth stared at her, unable to speak, aware only of the shame that seemed to burn on the skin of his hands, his neck, his shoulders. ...
>
> 'I know what you were before you met me,' she said. 'And I know what you must be again.'
>
> 'What I was before I met you,' Kenneth repeated dazed. 'What I must be again.' His shame burned, less fiercely, because he was so much less than he had been. He could not defend himself, he could not attack; yet a cry broke from his throat: 'You too——! You too——!' (p. 222)

If either had been more explicit about what she 'knows' and what he 'is' the misunderstanding would have been avoided. As it stands this is an unforgiveably contrived device to separate the lovers.

Isabel's intended sacrifice of their love goes against the point already established in the character of Miss Bentwisch, that self-sacrifice is of dubious value - to either the person making the sacrifice or to those supposed to benefit from it. This is reaffirmed in the scene where Isabel, back in Lyndhurst, confesses to Kenneth's brother:

> '... it was for you that I left him, only for you, and for all the others——' Isabel came forward, her hands still stretched towards Kenneth's brother, the tears running down her cheeks. 'I had to give Kenneth back to you,' she said. 'I am so glad you have come, so that I can tell you.' (p. 242)

Peter's furious response is the novel's most robust assertion of the claims of individual life above the promptings of social conscience:

> Suddenly, his hands shaking in front of his chest as if he wanted to strike her, the man shouted: 'F—— you! Who the hell do you think you are? And what do you think Kenneth is?' He shook his fist at Isabel; his voice rose still higher as if he spoke from a distance, and the words were carried to Isabel in the gusts of his rage. 'What do you think I am? Yes, me? You think I've got no life, except what Kenneth gives me? Who needs his saving? F—— him! F—— the pair of you!' (p. 242)

Isabel's return to Kenneth, like her departure, seeks dramatic impact in sketched events rather than in conveying the complexity of the characters' experience. Kenneth's psychological crises of identity are unresolved, the fact that they are almost exclusively depicted in outbursts in his journal suggesting that Jacobson is unsure how to pursue them within his relationship with Isabel. The reconciliation between Kenneth and Isabel on her return from South Africa still avoids any profound confrontation with the question of identity - and race as an important aspect of it-which has obsessed Kenneth; it lapses instead into romantic resolution:

> Once Kenneth said, 'I know what I am, now I love you again.'
>
> 'We know ourselves through each other.'
>
> 'But only when we are true to ourselves, apart.'
>
> 'What a mystery it is, my love.'
>
> 'A sweet mystery.' Kenneth held Isabel's arm at the elbow; then he kissed her there. 'Your sweet arm, where it bends,' he said; there were no other words he had for the wonder of her presence. (p. 245)

Kenneth and Isabel are next seen as Mr. & Mrs. Makeer, confronting the Immorality Act. The penultimate chapter ends with the intensely personal dialogue above, which concludes as follows:

> At last they fell deeply asleep. They woke to the warmth of the bed, the warmth of each other. Waking, they looked into one another's eyes, and seeing anguish, but no reproach, they knew that they had triumphed. Kenneth's limbs were full, heavy, languid; and Isabel nestled against him.
>
> 'We will find our way,' Kenneth assured her. (p. 245)

The contrast between this conclusion and the impersonal opening of the final chapter: "Two years later, Mr. & Mrs. Kenneth Makeer arrived in Cape Town on the *Kimberley Castle*" (p. 246) - has a certain dramatic impact, the contrived quality of which is emphasized by the ship's ironical name, Kimberley being Jacobson's 'Lyndhurst,' the town in which both Kenneth and Isabel grew up. Again, no background is given to their political decision to return to South Africa. Peter's outburst to Isabel had already made explicit the novel's tendency to affirm that meaning can only be sought within the limited circumstances of one's own life, not in externalized affirmation: Miss Bentwisch for all her 'causes'

was not happy and could not sustain Kenneth, Isabel was not happy in her charity work nor in her sacrifice for Kenneth's sake, and Kenneth could find no peace until he had accepted himself and been accepted in love. They do not intend to help their people, and only involve their families in pain and shame. What then is the motivation behind their return?

One suggested motivation lies in a dilemma that Kenneth experiences in London before the start of his relationship with Isabel. Thinking of his family's pride in him, his father's hurt and fear, Kenneth is horrified, but horrified too by the alternative which is now available to him:

> ... But the desolation was all of the past: the future was another matter altogether. The future was in the smiling faces of girls, the courtesy of bus-conductors, the banter of his fellow-pupils in Chambers, the bow of a commissionaire, the kindliness of Mr Prance; the future was casual, available, filled with hurrying crowds of people going about their business, none of whom would wonder that Kenneth Makeer had joined them. The future was atrocious, foul, abominable; and the more so for its very simplicity, its attractiveness, its ease, its inconsequence. (p. 182)

Submitting to imprisonment at the end of the novel is clearly intended as Kenneth's avoidance of this easy future, which does not explain his adaptation to it during the previous two years, not how he will adapt again when he and Isabel return to England after serving their six-month sentence. Their intention to return to England makes their trial a mere gesture which, if in private satisfaction of Kenneth's guilty sense of duty, the novel has already declared futile. With

Winegarten, one is "not convinced that this heroic act really arises logically out of the tale";[22] more than that,it goes against the logic of the tale.

Jacobson fails in his attempt to invest this final gesture with the public significance that would counteract Kenneth's horror of the 'inconsequence' of his life. Earlier, at the beginning and end of Chapter II the narrator had prepared the reader for dramatic events to come in the lives of Kenneth and Isabel: "We have all heard so much about them; we have all been given the chance to honour or revile their names" (p. 26); in the final chapter one is told that the case had become celebrated, "... had been so sensationally reported in the press, both locally and overseas," (p. 254) but the sensationalism, the sense of tragedy, is not conveyed by the text itself. An impassive judge passes sentence in a courtroom the atmosphere of which, insofar as it is mentioned, is ambiguous; and Kenneth's brief speech from the dock is formal and rhetorical:

> 'By arresting us and bringing us into this court,'
> he said, 'the State has made my love for my wife,
> and her love for me, a public and political act.
> For this reason we cannot be punished by the court,
> but only released by it - released from the public
> and political hatreds, the public and political
> guilts, which make ugly the most private and
> secret lives of everyone who lives in this
> country. ...' (p. 253)

What does he mean? He and Isabel have known no 'public and political' harrassment of their relationship, none of the gnawing tension and hopelessness of, for example, Josef and Jessica in Brink's *Kennis van die Aand:* they have a two-year marriage behind them and a refuge ahead, and

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[22] Winegarten, p. 72.

there is thus more than an element of self-dramatization in Kenneth's claiming 'release' from a system which, the love-scene seemed to suggest, has ceased to be a trap.

The whole trial is such an anticlimax that one wonders whether Jacobson did not perhaps intend it as such; the point would then not be that the couple's confrontation of the country's race laws has any objective significance, but that by returning they affirm that they have not been able to shed their national and racial identities by 'finding themselves' in love, but that they are trapped as South Africans and have to return. The trial would then be as deliberately unheroic as the truth which the young men discover about themselves in *A Dance in the Sun* or which Gottlieb discovers about himself in *The Price of Diamonds*. An interpretation along these lines suggests a parallel with Jacobson's own experience, for he 'returns' in five novels, and most explicitly in this one, to confront the nature of his society, as though the fact that he is a South African 'traps' him despite his immigration.

But though part of what Jacobson is saying in this novel is, undoubtedly, that Kenneth and Isabel cannot simply evade their South Africanness, the evidence is against an interpretation of the futility of their gesture as intentional. The narrator's foreboding hints; the intended pathos of Kenneth's speech; the obvious contrast between Kenneth and Isabel being driven off in police vans, and Peter's remark to his fiancée: "One day perhaps they'll be able to live here, like me and Betty" (p. 235) - all these things suggest that the reader is supposed to believe both in the value of the love subjected to this trial and in the value of Kenneth and Isabel's public gesture. One critic manages to see the trial as "the bloody beginning of a revolution in Lyndhurst

(a symbol of all South Africa) led jointly by the militant black and the liberal white, that is bound to succeed"[23] and Alvarez makes the surprising judgement that Jacobson's Jewishness gives him a greater racial sensitivity than Faulkner, and stops him from accepting any "pat political or romantic solution";[24] but pat solutions in the form of an abrupt bed-scene and a six-month sentence are precisely what are offered as solutions to Kenneth and Isabel's questions about who and what they are. After *The Evidence of Love* Jacobson does not again offer either love or heroics as solutions, having presumably realized that his attempt to do so in this novel lacks both consistency and conviction.

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[23] Nick Aaron Ford, "Battle of the Books," p. 126.

[24] Alvarez, p. 827.

CHAPTER IV: A TRANSITIONAL NOVEL: *THE BEGINNERS*.

> "It's a breaking down, not a building-up, you understand, that's begun." (p. 24)

Manny's words to Sarah in the fifth chapter of *The Beginners*[1] indicate the process through which most of the novel's characters pass. They set out to fulfil their various hopes but find themselves, through whatever way they choose, broken down to the essential weakness of their own personalities.

The beginners are those who live in a world in which the general breakdown of conviction and security has begun - though Joel, the central character, warns against invoking "the times" in explanation of human behaviour. The novel is a family saga, spanning three generations and three continents, in which Jacobson apparently attempts to fulfil what he had seven years previously outlined as the potential of the novel form : "The novel really is knowledge: the recorded knowledge of the states of consciousness of different men at different times. ... The characters in a novel are the novelist's individual foci of consciousness; they, ultimately, are what the novelist knows, and the greater the novelist the more characters he will be able to create and the more he will know about each one of them."[2]

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[1] *The Beginners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968). All references in the text are to this edition. First published in 1966.

[2] "Why Read Novels?" in *Time of Arrival*, p. 137-38.

Technically the proliferation of characters in *The Beginners* is not altogether successful. Significant moments in their lives are described in short, alternating chapters, the effect being of fragments repeating the same pattern rather than of lives explored in any depth - though the latter is what the epic form of the novel leads one to expect. As one reviewer put it: "... We pay calls, so to speak, on too many different privacies and are briefly admitted to an excessive number of innermost feelings."[3] The attempt to show significant linkages between the characters' lives is at times contrived: when Rachel, for example, stumbles out of Johannesburg station after saying goodbye to Jonathan, is drawn into a demonstration in the city centre and lands in Bertie's arms, after which they have coffee in the same cafe that Joel and Pamela had used years previously;or in the multiple overlap of Joel and Malcolm's lives.

The fault lies not so much in the number of characters as in the sameness of their lives. Winegarten refers to Jacobson's ideas in "Why Read Novels?" and says that *The Beginners* is "an attempt on Dan Jacobson's part to express both his total experience as a man, and his total awareness of the individual and general situation of the post-war generation."[4] But Jacobson's total awareness is significantly restricted in that all the experiences that he explores tend towards a similar outcome, roads converging in a common dead end. There is an inevitability in the characters' fates, which has been noted as a feature of Jacobson's short stories as well,[5] that after a while

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[3] "Doves and Dragons" (anon. rev.), *TLS*, 2 June 1966, p. 489.

[4] "The Novels of Dan Jacobson," p. 72.

[5] Jonathan Meades, Review of *Inklings, Books and Bookmen*, XVII (July 1973), 116.

precludes any sense of discovery in reading the novel. Margot Lester attributes the sameness of the novel to Jacobson's style, saying that "... perhaps in the very measure and cadence of his excellent prose, lurks a hidden pitfall. His careful style lacks a certain vivacity and boldness; it can dull what he has to say";[6] and Lionel Abrahams has a similar criticism of this novel:

> However much the theme of "beginners" philosophically justifies the inconsequentiality of events in this book, that inconsequentiality is a defect for a novel. The momentum of one's involvement is checked again and again. If there are related themes that justify and unify all the given material, one doesn't develop sufficient interest in the book as a whole to be tempted to search out these other themes. Apart from the anti-story structure, there is the pallour of Jacobson's world - or is it his style that is pallid, or the detachment with which he presents so many of these events? He gives us a familiar world, all right, but what it seems to be illustrating is the futility of ordinariness and the ordinariness of futility. Surely everyone's experience of reality frequently becomes more intense, more fantastic, more tragic and more marvellous than what he shows....[7]

In the context of Jewish historical novels Leslie Fiedler speaks of the "ambitious solemnities" of *The Beginners*, which he finds "... profoundly unexciting, technically unadventerous, unforgivably well behaved."[8]

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[6] "Dan Jacobson's New Novel," *Jewish Affairs*, XXI (August 1966), 115.

[7] Book Reviews, *The Classic*, II (1966), 79.

[8] "This Year We Are Slaves - Next Year We Shall Be Free" (1966) in *To the Gentiles* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), p. 142.

Christopher Ricks is almost alone in praising Jacobson's "understanding of the sporadic and the piecemeal"[9] and defending his large cast; as he sees it, the sprawling structure of the novel is a true response to our times. But the meaning of *The Beginners* is better understood within the context of Jacobson's work as a whole, where it clearly functions as a transitional novel. His vision of the trapped identity, linked in *The Trap*, *A Dance in the Sun* and *The Evidence of Love* to the South African socio-political system, is here embodied in various characters' experience, crossing sexual, age, and religious barriers. One is thus forced to see it as a condition of life rather than of life in a particular country. In *The Evidence of Love* Jacobson wrote against his own conviction in attempting to achieve romantic and political resolution, but *The Beginners* suggests that he has accepted his own cynicism and rootlessness: by the end of the novel any obligation to South Africa is written out ("It may be" he has said in retrospect, "that one in some way exhausts feelings by writing about them."[10]). Cynicism and rootlessness are dominating features of the central characters in Jacobson's later three novels, their basic experience being a horrified awareness of the confines of personal identity.

The transitional nature of *The Beginners* is apparent even without hindsight. Writing in 1967, Cronin anticipates Jacobson's remark about his two rounds as a novelist (see p. 1 above) when he says of *The Beginners*:

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[9] "One Little Liberal," *New Statesman*, 3 June 1966, p. 812.

[10] Hayman, p. 46.

> ... Jacobson seems to be offering his fictional personages the sort of solution he had earlier worked out for himself, but he leaves them with their lives still to live. They are 'beginners' and, in a very real sense, so is their creator. He must now make a beginning on his second phase as a novelist.[11]

If *The Beginners* exhausts the South African experience as subject matter, it is also the last time that Jacobson uses the realist mode in which this material had been presented. A reviewer of the second of his later novels, *The Wonder-Worker* comments retrospectively:

> ... by the time Jacobson published his long and sprawling Jewish-family chronicle, *The Beginners*, in 1966, one began to suspect that he had carried his commitment to naturalistic realism as far as it could go, that his private well of experience and memory was running dry. In rendering again the familiar faces and conflicts of South Africa and its Jews, this novel, with its rather obvious simplicities of generational growth and changes, its uncharacteristic blotches of sentimentality, showed distinct signs of fatigue ...[12]

Finally Wade, whose article shows him committed to Jacobson's liberalism, says with disappointment of the later novels:

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[11] Cronin, p. 81.

[12] Pearl K. Bell, "The Gift of Metamorphosis," *New Leader*, 1 April 1974, p. 17.

> ... the fundamental literary mode of English and European liberalism - fictive realism - has nothing further to offer Jacobson; ... this implies a disillusionment with the system of thought that lies behind the mode ... And thus, perhaps it is true that Jacobson, after all, has never taken easily to the conventions of liberal fiction and in the end has either rejected or been rejected by them ... [13]

For Jacobson, *The Beginners*, with its wealth of social and geographical detail, its foregrounding of individual experience and human relationships, exhausts the conventions of liberal realism.

The Beginners is introduced by the incident of Avrom Glickman's giving away, on an impulse of obscure revenge against his sons, the money they have saved to bring their mother and sister from Lithuania to join them in South Africa. In Avrom's weakness, his shame before his sons, the sentimentally vicarious sense of generosity and spirituality he feels on giving away the fifty gold sovereigns he has not helped to earn, much of the essential experience of two succeeding generations is suggested: humiliation, lack of self-respect, the recurrent sense of loss and futility, the short-lived nature of enthusiasms which never fulfil their promise.

Sarah Talmon, who marries one of Avrom's sons, provides a chronological framework for the novel: she is the first character into whose experience the reader is sympathetically drawn, her children - Joel, David, Rachel and their contemporaries - are the chief focus of the novel, which ends just

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[13] "Apollo, Dionysus," pp. 80-81.

after her death. Sarah's longing to find meaning in life through vivid experience prefigures that of the succeeding generation, not least in that it is doomed to disappointment:

> ... Her reading had promised her that life would be abundant in its stresses and beauties, terrors and satisfactions, surprises and reassurances. She believed her books - in fact it dismayed her that she believed in them far more than she did in her own experiences. Only her young brother, Samuel, had roused in her a protective passion from which she never felt distant, about which she was never doubtful. In Africa, strange Africa, she had hoped, things would be different. (p. 19).

Already during her weeks in the Karoo this expectation is fading, and seems to die at Manny's failure to affirm his love for her. By the time he does so, six months later from England, Sarah has already become engaged to Benjamin Glickman and entered into a marriage which gives her neither sexual nor emotional satisfaction. She loses any illusions about the way in which people seek abundance in their lives, and as such is a powerful, though background, figure in the novel: she is painfully aware that neither religion nor politics can prevent or ameliorate individual loneliness - this is a fact of life in Jacobson's terms, and one which the succeeding generation has to learn. The novel deals, for example, with a number of characters' responses to being Jewish; Sarah's response to Joel's identification with Jewish national ideals is extreme, but essentially anticipates Joel's own discovery of the futility of this attempt:

> '... I'm tired of the Jews, I'm not interested in them, or in the country they've got or haven't got, or in the religion they've got or haven't got, or in the race they belong to or don't belong to, or any of the other things that are supposed to make them so special. Look at you! You ... could be whatever you wanted to be. Instead you try to shuffle off the burden of yourself onto the Jews ... And don't tell me about Hitler and the killing of the Jews ... Hitler could kill me, he wanted to kill me, and I'd still say to him that being Jewish today is an unimportant affair. It's the measure of *his* miserable mind that he could kill people for something that mattered so little ...'
> 'So what is important?' Joel asked her.
> She swayed forward slightly, opening her hands a little -
> 'You're important. What I feel about you is important.' (p. 239)

In both passages quoted it is clear that Sarah finds meaning in life through her capacity to love; this is focussed primarily on her brother Samuel and subsequently on the children who justify her marriage, and especially on Joel. Consistent with Jacobson's perverse vision that the objects of our enthusiasm are invariably disappointing, Samuel is shown to be an utter failure, and it is Joel's child who later cannot bear to be near his grandmother. So while Sarah's scepticism about the significance of being Jewish is confirmed by the novel's sceptical treatment of any group sense of belonging, her emphasis on individual love is also not upheld as an alternative. Sarah's suffering is perhaps the most desolate of any character in the novel, for it involves her perception of the arbitrariness of one's destiny, thus lacking the egocentric comfort of Joel or Malcolm's self-analysis:

> ... She often had sleepless nights; only within the last few years had she been able to say to herself that the suffering she endured in the course of them had no greater moral significance than that of any other kind of pain which people had to live through. The conviction of total failure and incompetence which overwhelmed her, ... the envies ... the guilts ... the resentments ... the sense of her own worthlessness and lovelessness which possessed her: these were not the direct result of evil choices she had made, actions she had failed in, lies she had told, selfishnesses she had indulged herself in - though it was in such moral terms that they invariably presented themselves to her. They were simply the type of pain which she had been chosen to know. To know again and again. (p. 161)

Sarah is the dominating background figure of the novel; it is her son Joel whose development is foregrounded, and in relation to whom the other characters are shown. Jacobson says that Joel is not an autobiographical figure,[14] though there are grounds for considering him so: Joel's Lithuanian immigrant parents, his father's butter factory, his period on a *kibbutz* in Israel and subsequent immigration to England, and his largely cultural rather than political discontent with South Africa echo Jacobson's own circumstances and views. Joel's distinctive characteristic is his doubt about the worth of his actions - his friends' joking epithet, 'The Hamlet of Hospital Hill,' captures both his lack of conviction and what he feels to be the mundanity of the issues in his life.

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[14] Private conversation, June 1980.

Joel, as a soldier just returned from World War II, and his very dissimilar younger brother David, are both encountered in the process of realizing the failure of those common adolescent hopes that dissatisfaction with one's failings can be cured by setting a significant date for their disappearance. David is described alone in a toilet, having perversely stayed on late at school to deny himself the pleasure of seeing his newly-returned brother, and having deliberately masturbated in order to confirm his self-disgust:

> 'Vile,' David said aloud to himself. 'Vile.' Even as he said the word he liked its literary, almost archaic sound; and his enjoyment of it seemed to him in itself vile. He had sworn that from the day of Joel's return he would not do it again; and yet here he was, on the very day he had named, washing the evidence of his vileness from his hands ... So Joel's arrival had helped him as little as any of the previous occasions for reform that he had set himself; he was still what he had always been. And what was that? Vile. (p. 47).

Where David's judgement of himself is old testamental - a tendency paradoxically alleviated by his later becoming, for a while, a 'serious' Jew - Joel's is ironical, exasperated. Soon after his return home he experiences the sense of aimlessness which is to dog him throughout his life:

> Throughout his time in the army ... Joel had been hoping to come upon a strength and certitude in himself which would be inalienable. Always it had seemed to him that he would find it just one stage ahead from where he was. Before enlistment he had thought he would put on strength with

> his uniform; during his training he had expected to find it when he was posted abroad; in the reserves, when he had seen action; after the war, when he would come home. Now he was home; and where was the confidence, the certainty, the inward security he had been promising himself? What was he to be? Where was he to live? How was he to live? Who was there to guide him? (p. 55)

So when he meets his father's secretary, Pamela Curtis, whom he is much later to marry, Joel lacks the conviction to develop the relationship; going to university is no solution either. He expresses to Pamela both his envy for the commitment which he sees in various forms in his family and fellow-students, and doubt about the value of what anyone is doing, about the ends towards which they are directed. "It all seems so mean and pointless," he complains, "it's all on such a petty trivial scale ..." (p. 33). Yet he objects most strongly those who want to see their activity in a wider perspective - the political radicals who:

> ... talk about moulding the future, changing the world, making history. Then I ask myself what I will be, what will my life be like when they're finished with their moulding and making. And the answer is that I'll still be me, I can't become anyone else; I may be richer or poorer, or I may be in a concentration camp, or I may be dead. But if I'm alive I'll still be bound by the things that bind me now, because they're not just out there in the society or the economic system; they're right in me, they're part of me. (p. 123)

Against Joel's doubts that life can be anything but trivial, Pamela defends the worth of simply working well, of 'being committed to whatever happens to you':

> '... I don't suppose you've ever thought that some people do what they do - whatever it is - for the sake of what they're doing, and do it as well as they can because that's exactly the way to make it worthwhile. You're just afraid of being ordinary, that's the trouble with you - and because you're afraid, you're less than ordinary, you're nothing at all ...' (p. 124)

But if Joel is, as he recognizes, self-centred in his search for meaning in his life, Pamela's attitude towards her life is limited. Years later she marries Malcolm and puts her energy and wealth at this aspiring young writer's disposal, and when their marriage is breaking up finds herself back again with Joel, confessing in what could have been a response to their earlier conversation:

> 'God, I wish I could - generalize my problems. I wish I felt they weren't just private and personal and insignificant. I suppose it serves me right for never really thinking about anything except myself - my life, my happiness, my decisions. So now that I know they're all good for nothing I've got nothing else. Nothing. Nothing.' (p. 431)

So her apparently positive alternative to Joel's restless dissatisfaction is also not endorsed by the novel: it leads her back to share Joel's self-doubt, back to a starting-point with herself.

At the time of his first conversation with Pamela, Joel's sense of himself as an "irritated pinpoint of consciousness" (p. 130) is briefly alleviated by a passage from Pascal which his history Professor one day quotes in class: "'If the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his killer. For he knows that he is dying, and that the universe has the

advantage over him; the universe knows nothing of this"' (p. 134). To Joel these words came as a way of fusing two truths: that everything exists indifferently beyond him, and that he himself is a focus of understanding: on the level at which one uses one's understanding simply because it is part of the world, there "... private effort could become part of a shared, public truth" (p. 135). So one sees that despite Joel's dismissal of radical politics as an attempt at agglomeration, he too needs to alleviate his sense of arbitrariness through shared effort, and to attain some absolute truth.

Winegarten sees the quote from Pascal as a central passage in the novel, as though Jacobson were hereby making the liberal existentialist point that each individual's consciousness of life is unique and "infinitely precious on that account."[15] Yet it is the isolation, the particular limitations that govern each person's perception of the world that are stressed in this novel, rather than their unique value. Neither Prof. Viljoen nor Joel derives any long-term comfort from the philosophical idea that man's consciousness makes him superior to the universe that crushes him. Jacobson's intention in raising and apparently answering at this stage in the novel the profound question of man's relation to the universe, is, it would seem, to minimize its impact, and the possibility of the philosophical position being taken as an answer. It becomes irrelevant as the course of what Joel calls his failures is traced, and he is seen struggling to cope with himself in relation to more mundane things than the universe, like his work and his wife.

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[15] Winegarten, p. 72.

In Zionism, in which he becomes involved largely through his involvement with the girl Natalie, Joel finds the sense of shared public truth for which he has longed, and a sense of history he has missed because, as he says: "I'm not an Englishman or a German or a Frenchman. And ... I don't know what kind of South African I am." (p. 142). But it is more than social identity that Joel is trying to find. His defence of Zionism to Malcolm indicates that he is still avoiding confrontation with his own ordinariness. The latter part of the passage echoes Jacobson's description in his article "Settling in England" of his early experience as a South African:

> '... I don't think there's anything so ordinary about what I'm - what we're trying to do. We are trying to cure ourselves of all the false, negative ways of being set apart that we suffer from, the wrong kinds of specialness. Or loneliness ... marginality - I don't know what the word is. But I know what the state is: to be a kind of demi-European at the bottom of Africa, to be a demi-Jew among Gentiles. Other people have other ways of suffering from it.' (p. 194)

This too fails. In a melodramatic preview the reader is told that the leader of Joel's Zionist training group is one of the first to leave the *kibbutz* in Israel, and eventually becomes a successful Johannesburg lawyer. Jacobson's point is clear: the theory of collective behaviour exists on the training from outside Johannesburg: it does not survive on the *kibbutz* itself. So one witnesses Joel's initial sense of "a great burden of self-consciousness" falling away in Israel (p. 264) and his encounter with his cousin Yitzchak, whose wartime experience has made him long only for a wife, a home, a job: that such suffering should

have so mundane a desire as its outcome appals Joel; once again all activities seem arbitrary to him, lacking in intrinsic value, merely filling up human time.

This sense of futility, which is the constant companion of Jacobson's later characters, becomes the truth festering inside Joel in place of the shared public truth which he had hoped would save him. After his decision to leave the *kibbutz*, there is no longer any chance that Joel will find a sense of reality within a greater whole. He returns to finish a degree in South Africa, the country he had previously felt it right to reject, then moves to London. Emotionally he is back at the point reached in his conversation with Pamela: the rejection of agglomeration of any kind. In an argument with his brother David on the value of Judaism he rejects finding justifications for himself in favour of 'exploring his own margins' (p. 358). This is the most hopeful expression of his gnawing feeling of isolation and futility, which leaves him in the closing pages anticipating a nervous breakdown. Unlike Lessing's exiles - Martha in *The Four-Gated City* (1969) and Anna in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), he cannot head into insanity in search of truth or reality: Joel, finally, has "no alternative to trying to keep sane" (p. 490). He is the last of Jacobson's characters to be so earnest about it.

The pattern of Joel's life has been traced in such detail because it is essentially that followed by the other characters explored. Malcolm, the ambitious young writer, functions both as a counterfoil for Joel's experience and a support for the insights conveyed through it. He and Joel dislike one another when they first meet as students, and are brought into direct conflict years later in London, when Joel falls in

love with Pamela and must confront Malcolm, her husband, before taking her away. They are in many respects antithetical: Malcolm is a Gentile, attracted by Afrikaner bohemia, with a powerful motivation towards achievement which makes him first an up-and-coming novelist in England and then drives him back to South Africa to put his talents at the service of the Nationalist Government. This move is not condemned by the novelist - the political nature of the decision is played down, its logic in terms of Malcolm's personal needs emphasised: his need to "count" (p. 392), to have the "maximum effect" of which he is capable, to find a "worthy object for his anger" (p. 393). Jacobson uses self-knowledge as his measure for behaviour in this novel, and Malcolm is thus found, in the process of making his decision, confronting himself as both David and Joel had done at the beginning of the novel:

> ... he had been determined to do work that would stand out, stand apart, individual, meaningful, distinctive and recognizable by others; only in that sense had 'art' been his intention. He could say that he had succeeded ... But wasn't it time that he ... 'accepted' his own nature, and ceased to hope that some success he hadn't yet attained - some book he hadn't yet written, some recognition he hadn't yet had, some wealth he hadn't yet earned - could assuage his angers? (p. 395).

Wade sees Malcolm as "deeply disturbing" to Jacobson in the choice he makes about his South African identity, and decisively rejected, with an uncharacteristic lack of compassion.[16] Malcolm in fact has at least one characteristic which Jacobson as a writer surely approves, namely

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[16] Wade, p. 79.

the conviction of the value of his own perception which is a prerequisite for creative writing; and if one takes Joel as the central and most sympathetically treated character in the novel it is clear that Malcolm is not as far from the writer's sympathy as it may at first appear, for in Malcolm the pattern of Joel's thought is intensified. Malcolm's self-torture differs from Joel's only in being more forceful. In an outburst after the accident through which he and Joel first met, he echoes in anger and determination what Joel had earlier said to Pamela in weary self-disgust:

> '... To live, to endure all the bloody ignominies and frustrations of living, and then to be snuffed out, having got nothing out of it except what everybody else gets; and to know beforehand that that's all you're going to get - the thought of it just makes me feel claustrophobic, I couldn't stand it. Don't you want to be - to make yourself - special? God knows, I do. More than ever, after what happened last night.' (p. 194).

Malcolm, like Joel, is afraid of being 'ordinary,' of life never yielding to him its "abundance of stresses and beauties." It is this fear, rather than socio-political or artistic conviction, that makes him become a writer. He derides the

> ... supposedly clever people in London who solemnly asked him sooner or later, 'Do you think you'll be able to go on working, now that you're cut off from your roots?' As if he hadn't been goaded into his ambitions, hadn't chosen his career, precisely with the intention of leaving behind what they were too smug and stupid ever to think of as 'roots' - humiliations, isolations, angers, hatreds, frustrations ... But what if they could never be left behind? If they were

> the ground of his being, the mode of his understanding? If the incurable singleness of his body among so many millions of others was one aspect of them, its mortality another, the limitations of his mind a third? (p. 394).

The question, 'Do you think you'll be able to go on working now that you're cut off from your roots?' is one which Jacobson must often have faced, and which, in its mixture of sentimentality and literariness, must have become tedious to a writer who had never felt the security of roots in his home country. Malcolm's admission gives a very different view of a writer in exile to that suggested in the popular and deliberately naive short story "Fresh Fields " (1961; see p. 74 above), and anticipates Jacobson's three later characters, whose sense of who they are is grounded in frustration and isolation, and whose lives are attempts to master these experiences. The questions Malcolm asks himself express a perception to which the most self-aware characters in *The Beginners* come, namely that their limitations and sufferings are part of their very being, not aspects of a time of life or a place in which they live. This type of psychological determinism is the nightmare of the later protagonists, and it is towards their extreme isolation that Jacobson is working. Malcolm is not condemned for returning to South Africa, just as Joel finds no solution in immigrating, because the conditions and problems of specific countries are not central to the writer's purpose.

That Jacobson is not concerned with social criticism in this novel is clear from his treatment of the black characters, and the fate of those whites who are politically concerned. The measure of Jacobson's sense of obligation towards his morally sensitive South African material in his earlier novels, was explicitness about the conditions of black life, but

Wade asks with some horror of *The Beginners*: "But what about Africa? Such an inclusive novel by a South African without a single 'real' black character, or any direct dealing with racial conflict? What is one to make of this? "[17] In *The Beginners* the conditions of black life are left as they are for the majority of South African whites, as a backdrop to their own lives. One is shown Annie, the Glickmans' family servant, greeting Joel on his return from the war, later working for Rachel and temporarily dissatisfied with having to live in the dormitory at the top of a block of flats. Rachel, despite her good works in black areas, cannot cope with the problem, but Annie is pacified, as Sylvia was in *The Price of Diamonds*, by attention from her white master. Jacobus, the other family servant, is shown struggling to learn to read at a white-run nightschool; the lesson is disrupted by a black band who knows that "... these whites were liberals, radicals, leftists, sentimentalists of some kind - or they wouldn't have been there at all - and thus easy to bully" (p. 79). In fact Jacobson makes a point of showing lack of unity between blacks, revealing again his scepticism about any common cause for South Africans, black or white: thus it is a neighbouring black servant who causes Jacobus' arrest and disappearance to a penal farm near Bethal, and Ntuli the black communist who is later state witness against his friends.

Jacobson's cynicism about liberal - radical political opinion, which emerged strongly in *The Evidence of Love*, is wearily dismissive here. In the article "Liberalism and Literature," written between the publication

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[17] Wade, p. 78.

of these two novels, he affirms his allegiance, broadly speaking, to liberalism, but analyzes its great failing as

> ... the refusal to acknowledge the fact that conflict is the prime, painful condition of existence and growth. Hidden deep within the drift of most modern liberal or radical thinking is the notion that if only we were cleverer, kinder or better organized than we are now, it should be possible, somewhere, somehow, for us to enjoy success without failure, repose without strain, achievement without sacrifice, pleasure without pain - and yet be human ... [18]

In *The Beginners* political activity is repeatedly shown as an attempt to sublimate individual pain. It is dealt with from this perspective only, without reference to its value in a political sense. The harshest example in this respect is that of Bertie Preiss, self-conscious and slighted by Rachel, who makes a name for himself on Wits campus as a radical. Describing a township meeting which Bertie addresses, Jacobson focuses on the studiedness of his self-presentation; what he says is not recorded, its value not assessed. When he gives up radical politics to marry Rachel, Bertie becomes embittered, his life empty and fragmented - not because, in the novelist's eyes, he has deserted the cause, but because he has betrayed his own knowledge of himself as a person for whom ideology plays a sustaining role. Jacobson's exposure of Bertie's degeneration is merciless (he is the other character whom Wade sees as decisively rejected by the writer, see p. 124 above); Jacobson's judgement is, consistent with his view of the inevitability and pain of self-knowledge, Bertie's own constant, merciless beration of himself.

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[18] *New Statesman*, 1 March 1963, p. 312.

In perhaps the novel's most bitter irony, Bertie is finally seen making profits on shares bought after the 1960 riots, convinced that the revolution towards which he had once worked will not occur.

Adela Klein, in turn, becomes involved in radical politics because of her feeling for Bertie. She compensates for his abandonment of her by identifying with the Communist Movement, and Jacobson points to the vicarious, unrealistic nature of this identification when he says that after six months "she felt more at home when she read the English-language Communist journals published in Budapest or Prague than when she read the Johannesburg newspapers." (pp. 259-60). Dora Magid, the dedicated political lawyer who later defends Adela at her trial, also owes her dedication at least partly to a let-down by a man, Joel. To the question Pamela puts to him in London: "'So what's going to happen between the two of you? If she wants to go back and you don't?'" Joel replies: "'She'd stay if I asked her to.'" In other words, Dora's devotion to the cause of political change in South Africa, which is presumably what makes her want to return, is not more important than her personal happiness. Jacobson's repeated debunking of political activity relative to personal need is significant in a consideration of him as a South African writer, for it marks the decrease in his sense of responsibility towards the problems of his home country. One suspects that the writer endorses the attitude to opposition politics inconspicuously expressed by a minor character, Leverkuhn, who says that he "... knew better now than to try to work out his 'inner disharmonies and disequalibriums' by inciting the Africans to revolt, especially as the overwhelming mass of the Africans were deeply acquiescent in what was being done to them ..." (p. 422).

As to other causes, Benjamin relies heavily on Zionism as a "moral and emotional recompense for the humiliations, estrangements and insecurities he had suffered in his own life" (p. 343), and David tries to become a practising Jew because he wants the guidance and experience that belonging to a group can give him (p. 353). David through his solitary hard-working life and occasional moments of inspiration, succeeds more than any other character in overcoming the inadequacies that he feels in himself - a success measured again in terms of self-knowledge rather than of the worth and power of Judaism.

No-one in the novel can be said to achieve more than this partial triumph. The women who live according to instinct rather than self-analysis, come to bleakly ironical ends: Natalie, 'touchstone' (p. 210) of the Zionist group whose fears prevent her from actually going to Israel and who ends up in a dismal domestic existence in contrast to "the largeness of the changes she has wished for in her own single life, and the lives of others" (p. 183); Rachel, abandoned by Jonathan and ashamed at being grateful for so little (p. 472) in her marriage to Bertie, feeling that they have at last settled down together just as he begins having affairs (p. 474); Pamela who gives all she can to Malcolm and earns only his contempt, and whose decision to leave him and marry Joel arises not from her discovery of true love but from her realization that "her chances of happiness were remote indeed, whatever she did." (p. 444). The scepticism about love and marriage which emerges from all Jacobson's novels except *The Evidence of Love*, underlies every attempt at union in this novel. Only the two London socialite couples briefly described, the Warrentons and Jonathan and June, show any unity, and this is clearly superficial and based on shared ambition.

Like many of his characters, Jacobson appears to be fascinated by failure and humiliation, and persistently returns to these experiences in *The Beginners*. David, before his conversion, enjoys his judgement of himself as vile; Joel recognizes in himself an "appetite for failure" and Pamela is horrified by the "loyalty to unhappiness" (p. 383) that she has developed; Malcolm in his earlier relationship with Jackie "gloated over her imperfections and vulgarities" (p. 176); Sarah who was strong becomes "emotionally craven" (p. 475) in her old age. The pattern of humiliation includes the minor characters: Pratley, chief butter-maker at Benjamin's factory, timid and masochistically malicious; cameos of sycophancy in Max, Meyer Glickman's son-in-law and Hooper the writer at Jonathan's party; Yitzchak who experiences the extreme degradation of a Jew on the run during the war; Samuel Talmon, a pathetic failure; Malcolm Begbie's father who dies ignominiously on the street just as he is at last beginning to be a successful business man. To take up Wade's point once again (see pp.124&28 above), it is Samuel and Begbie, rather than Malcolm and Bertie, whom Jacobson despises: the persistence of their illusions disqualifies them from any compassion.

The novel thus depicts a variety of ways in which people approach their lives, the outcome determined by Jacobson's view that the individual is always broken down, through humiliation and failure, to a recognition of his own limitations. The central characters of the later three novels begin with this knowledge.

In considering *The Beginners* within the chronology of Jacobson's work, Wade's comments in his critical study of Nadine Gordimer require some emendation. He describes her first novel *The Lying Days* (1953) as cast in the form of a journey from the outside inwards towards the heart of experience, and says that

> ... Nadine Gordimer was merely recognizing the inevitable in adopting this technique. It is interesting to note ... how her two 'serious' male contemporaries, Abrahams and Jacobson, were forced ... to the same recourse, though in both cases after the unnecessary squandering of a certain amount of creative energy, and also in both cases in the wrong order. Jacobson reaches this point in *The Beginners*, his fifth novel; and Abrahams in *Return to Goli* (1953) and *Tell Freedom* (1954)... The point that is being made is that the South African novelist is unable to liberate himself sufficiently from the effects of his environment (that is, from a bewilderment of possibilities) to do artistic justice to any aspect of South African reality until he has undergone this experience, which is the experience of writing a book like *The Lying Days* or *The Beginners*. *The Beginners* is an accumulation of virtually all the evidence, a scrutiny as remorseless as it is subjective, and a partial submersion of the standard temptation of the novelist to 'tell the truth' until some sort of basis for an attempt to do so emerges from the welter of facts and feelings. ... [19]

He follows this up by saying that Gordimer's order is more logical, her first novel on a South African theme being comparable to Jacobson's last. The parallel is misleading. In *The Lying Days* Helen Shaw's early life is recorded in detail, she changes and learns a lot and is left on the brink of new discoveries about herself and her relation to her country. The hopefulness of this ending is not possible for any character in *The Beginners;* the discoveries Joel makes about himself are not clear changes towards the emergence of a more mature and self-critical person, as are Helen's, but reaffirmations of what he knows about himself. Jacobson

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[19] *Nadine Gordimer*, Modern African Writers Series (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1978), p. 6.

accumulates the evidence not in order to allow a basis for statement to emerge, but precisely in order to state in as many ways as there are characters, what he has come to understand as his attitude to South Africa, and what he sees as the nature of individual life. *The Lying Days* is a first novel, *The Beginners* a far more disillusioned work - not the basis for further exploration of South African reality, but a generalization of perceptions rooted in it; Jacobson's liberation not from the bewilderment of possibilities in his South African material, but from any of its claims.

CHAPTER V: THE PROBLEMATIC NOVELS

When after *The Beginners* Jacobson ceased writing realist novels and turned in the following three - *The Rape of Tamar* (1970), *The Wonder-Worker* (1973) and *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* (1977)[1] - to more experimental forms of fiction, he was effecting his own liberation from the dominant mode of his South African past as well as mirroring a post-war literary trend. Novel criticism in England over the last decade points to the conflict or compromise in the British novel between an allegiance to 19th century realism revived in the 1950s and a tendency away from traditional realism, especially in the 1960s and 70s, influenced by the developments in fictionality apparent in the French *nouveau roman* and in American post-modernism. David Lodge's essay "The Novelist at the Crossroads" (1971) distinguishes three alternatives to traditional realism: fabulation, as defined by Robert Scholes in *The Fabulators* (1967); the non-fiction novel of, for example, Mailer and Capote; and the problematic novel, in which the writer's 'hesitation at the crossroads' is itself built into the novel, which thus examines the process of its own creation:

> It is in fact the transference of the writer's own sense ... of the problematic nature of his undertaking - making the reader *participate* in the aesthetic and philosophical problems the writing of fiction presents, by embodying them directly in the narrative - that characterizes the 'problematic novel.' [2]

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[1] *The Rape of Tamar* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970); *The Wonder-Worker* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1977); *The Confessions of Joseph Baisz* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977). All reference in the text are to these editions. *The Wonder-Worker* was first published in 1973.

[2] "The Novelist at the Crossroads" in *The Novelist at the Crossroads and other essays on fiction and criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 24.

The American critic Robert Alter speaks of the 'self-conscious novel' from Cervantes to Nabokov, as one which "systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and ... by doing so probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality," relating this "baring of literary artifice" over the last two decades to "modern culture's general commitment to knowing all that can be known about its own components and dynamics."[3] Malcolm Bradbury says: "We live in an age in which fiction has conspicuously grown more provisional, more self-questioning than it was a few years ago. ... many questions about the nature of fictionality ... have come to the forefront of attention."[14] In *The Rape of Tamar* and *The Wonder-Worker* this self-questioning is apparent in the foregrounding of the narrator, and the exploration, both implicit and explicit, of the process of narration as a creation of illusions. The creation of illusions is also important in *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, though this novel is not as a whole presented as a paradigm of literary creation.

Jacobson's change from mainstream realism to problematical fiction would seem to have led to his greater recognition as an English novelist. Bradbury's preface to *The Contemporary English Novel* (1979) lists him alongside A.S. Byatt, David Lodge, J.G. Farrell and others,[5] while Byatt mentions *The Rape of Tamar* and *The Wonder-Worker* in the context of what she in turn calls 'fictiveness,'[6] and Bernard Bergonzi's essay in the

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[3] *Partial Magic: The Novel as Self-Comscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. *x* & 219-20.

[4] Introduction to *The Novel Today*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 8.

[5] Preface to *The Contemporary English Novel*, p. 14.

[6] "People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to 'Realism' and 'Experiment' in English Postwar Fiction," in *The Contemporary English Novel*, p. 34.

same volume mentions these novels of Jacobson's as two of the many in English fiction over the last two decades which fit Lodge's proposed category.[7] Jacobson's involvement in this terminological interchange is not itself great - he has in fact been criticized for his lack of involvement in current critical thought.[8] But though he treats with aversion terms like 'fictionality' he does speak of his interest, particularly between writing *The Rape of Tamar* and *The Wonder-Worker*, in those writers who "employ the problematics of writing within their fictions," and mentions Borges and Nabokov specifically, acknowledged masters of the type of fiction under discussion.[9]

It has been suggested in this thesis that Jacobson's novels can be seen as a series of attempts to find a form for his South African material. In exploring in particular the problematic relationship between a narrator and his story, Jacobson finds the form best suited to his themes, which are abstracted out of their earlier context. His narrators are aware of telling stories about themselves in which their role is fixed; any attempt at transcendence of the stories of their lives, like Timothy's in *The Wonder-Worker*, is doomed to failure. Where the use of the first-person peripheral narrator in *A Dance in the Sun* and *The Evidence of Love* facilitated naive social comment, in each of these novels the mediation of the first-person central narrator stresses the pain, as Yonadab says in *The Rape of Tamar*, of enduring one's own consciousness, and the fact that any individual can only assess reality within the limitations of his own mind.

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[7] "Fictions of History," in *The Contemporary English Novel*, p. 48.

[8] Bernard Bergonzi, "The Ideology of Being English" in *The Situation of the Novel*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 70-71. The Criticism is in connection with Jacobson's article "Muffled Majesty" (1967), see footnote 10 overleaf.

[9] Private correspondence, 20 March 1980.

This appears to contradict Jacobson's argument in an article published after his previous novel *The Beginners*, in which he argues against the novel of totally mediated action and in favour of the return to fiction of the omniscient narrator.[10] But insofar as his main criticism is of the modernist insistence on impersonality, on showing rather than telling, the argument can be seen to give rise to the later characters, whose explicit self-examination allows for and accentuates the tendency, characteristic of his early novels, to *spell out* the relevant issues.

Betrayal, which was crucial to the plot of Jacobson's early novels, is a way of life for Yonadab and Josef Baisz . Betrayal here works by the presentation to others of a false face which establishes power over them but is ultimately futile. The later three characters are involved in the creation of false identities and as narrators are to a greater or lesser extent paradigms of the artist who creates characters through briefly becoming them, has power over them and the reader but is finally, when the story is told, left confronting only himself. Each novel is structured as narration about the past interwoven with comments about the narrator's present position, leading to a point where the narration is over and the narrator confronts his own reality. The psychological dead-end that self-confrontation implies in *The Beginners* gains an external form in the circumstances of the later novels' narration: the story of the rape of Tamar is told from the dead, Timothy's story from an asylum, and Josef Baisz writes his confessions as the last act before his suicide. The irony evident in the fate of van Schoor, Fletcher, Bertie etc., dominates the later novels in which the characters suffer the same ironical fates that, with their god-like knowledge that free-will is illusory, they have engineered for others.

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[10] "Muffled Majesty," *TLS*, 26 October 1967, p. 1007.

A marked difference between these and the earlier novels lies in their settings - ancient Israel, an asylum, the fantasy Republic of Sarmeda - all in various ways distant from us as readers, and thus not requiring the moral treatment or eliciting the moral response of a contemporary, controversial society like South Africa. If on immigrating to England Jacobson wanted to let his troublesome roots wither, this desire achieves artistic representation in his later novels where he is evidently free of his earlier urge to describe and judge his home country. In his interview with Ian Hamilton after the publication of *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*, Jacobson speaks of the feeling of exhilaration which was in part generated by adopting the voice of a thoroughly unscrupulous type, and elaborates:

> ... If I became a writer for any single reason, it was that I loved reading as a kid; and I didn't love it because it was an educative or morally improving activity, but because it was a way of being other than I was, someone else ... I wanted to participate in this... other-making activity ... when I found that ... I *could* no longer write about South Africa, one of the reasons I felt liberated was that I was no longer working under external obligations of any kind ... my attitudes have shifted, either forward or back, towards a much greater respect for the idea of art for art's sake. That's a tired and unconvincing slogan; but what I mean by it is that the giving of enjoyment, the taking out of the reader from himself, the creation of new, whole fantasy experiences, seems to me the most important job that fiction does. I really do believe that. [11]

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[11] Hamilton, p. 26.

In what sense these novels constitute 'new, whole fantasy experiences' requires consideration. What is important to note is that Jacobson is able to say of them: "I care more about the recent work. I am more satisfied with it. It's more like what I would have wished to write when I first thought that perhaps I might become a writer."[12]

In their self-reflexiveness, the later characters represent a further stage of the experience faced by the earlier characters. It is a development which also points to the writer's own self-examination: where up to this point he examined the South African and Jewish aspects of his past, now he examines the process of writing itself. This brings with it both freedom and disillusionment. One sees the writer liberating himself from issues about which he had previously felt obliged to be in earnest, parodying the expectations to which he had previously responded: *The Rape of Tamar* plays with his solemn Jewish inheritance, *The Wonder-Worker* with the England which had been so desirable and challenging, *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* with a South Africa which had required his social concern. The disillusionment which underlies these novels also makes them, in a sense, Jacobson's private jokes.

The Rape of Tamar

The notion of freedom from past expectations gives a private meaning to the epigraph to *The Rape of Tamar:* "I repeat - my memory is not roving but inimical, and it labours not to reproduce but to distance the past." Yonadab refuses to reproduce the Biblical past as the reader may expect it; he challenges (p. 10) and mocks the reader's expectation

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12 Ibid.

that the narrator of an historical novel will be at pains to recreate his historical world by, for example, his sardonic asides ("broad vertical stripes in purple and white were very fashionable in my day, I might mention in passing" (p. 11)), and by debunking his description of one of King David's processions through the countryside with the comment: "Picturesque, isn't it? Uncomfortable, too ..." (p. 24). Alter says that one of the ways in which the self-conscious novel becomes effective is through conveying to the reader "a sense of the fictional world as an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention."[13] While *The Rape of Tamar* is far from being as overtly literary as the works which Alter examines, part of its impact lies in a reversal of the reader's expectations of an historical novel, a point which afforded Jacobson some amusement in writing this novel, as his article on it makes clear:

> An excessive interest in the Old Testament, Evelyn Waugh once remarked, is often a sign of incipient insanity. His opinion seems to be widely shared, to judge from the way people looked at me when I told them I was writing a novel based on the story of the rape of King David's daughter, Tamar, by her brother Amnon. Admittedly, I knew, and they did not, that the novel was intended to be neither a 'Biblical Epic' in the style of Cecil B. DeMille, nor a painstaking naturalistic attempt to re-create the period in which it was set. On the contrary. One of the things that strongly attracted me to the subject was the chance it gave me to break away from the conventions of naturalism in narrative technique and in mode of approach to times past and present.[14]

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[13] Alter, p. *xi*.

[14] "The King and I," *Listener*, 13 July 1972, p. 33.

The subject chosen highlights certain of Jacobson's desired effects; the cynicism of the narration is for example highlighted by its application to a story from which the reader may expect more tragic or romantic resonance. The disappointment of such expectations makes one's reading part of the pattern of disillusioning experience faced by the characters. It can also be assumed that the reader knows 2 Samuel 13, and will, like Yonadab, see the characters as doomed to their respective ends before the narration begins.

Yonadab constantly exploits this sense of the story as given, pointing to alternatives for action which are not taken and switching to the future tense in anticipation of what will occur. His role as narrator is foregrounded, and the characters' freedom of choice questioned. This stresses on the one hand the psychological point that each individual is a trap to himself, and on the other, their status as fictional characters, so that the traditional novel's illusion of reality is deliberately undermined. Where in *The Evidence of Love* and *The Beginners* the technique of narrative anticipation was used to melodramatic effect, here it is both integrated into Jacobson's theme and is a legitimate aspect of his new self-conscious form.

The illusion that the narrator of an historical novel inhabits the world about which he speaks is also undermined. Yonadab remains conscious of historical developments since his time; he speaks from the vantage point of death, from which state he sees himself as summoned to tell his story. This device allows him to comment on the present, and has been seen as one of the novel's chief merits. Theodore Solotaroff describes *The Rape of Tamar* as "an important text for our times, addressed to that blinkered condition most of us share called present-mindedness" and adds:

> ... The purpose and strength of Jacobson's novel is in reconstructing and pointing a few ancient memories, of making the shadow of some events three-thousand years ago and of the man who arranged them and those who suffered them fall upon the present.[15]

This credits Jacobson with a sense of mission to his time that he admits to having lost;[16] Yonadab's comments on the present are sour and reactionary rather than revelatory:

> ... I threw up some blackish stuff in which were mixed a few elastic white fragments ... I stared at the fragments with all the owlish intensity, it now occurs to me, of one of your pot-smoking poets; bemusedly convinced, as they with their spewings, that the sight would be enormously meaningful if only I could get over the difficulty of ascribing a meaning to it ... (p. 134).

> ... Must I flatter the notion you like to have of your difference from the miserable, weightless rabble who crowd the spaceless chambers and corridors of the dead? Not as long, comrades, as you ... make your grabs at transcendence through history, love, art, the fate of the nation or the proletariat, the smoking of hashish, or even the watching of television. Not as long as you revel in the admiration of the people around you and shuffle with whatever truths you claim to believe out of fear of their disapproval; ... Not as long as your 'generation' - to use the word you love so much - continues to fulfil in its own way, like every other, its varying norms of conformism and credulity. (p. 93).

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15 "Against the Temporal Vanities," *New Republic*, 14 November 1970, p. 28.

16 Hamilton, p. 26.

Hopefully these comments are not intended as incisive criticism of 'our times' though in their snideness they do bear resemblance to Jacobson's remarks on another modern phenomenon, male liberation, in a 1972 London Sunday Times article.[17] References to pot-smokers and the proletariat obviously do not constitute a 'text for our times', and Solotaroff's remarks indicate the persistence among certain of Jacobson's critics to seek in him a moral voice. The novel's potential seriousness as regards either society or fictionality is further undermined by the fact that in exploiting Yonadab's temporal mobility, Jacobson is guilty of more than the one or two lapses of taste which Winegarten notes:[18] "(You may, if you wish, imagine me suitably dressed for my part, with my flesh and features arranged in a conventionally life-like manner ...)" (p. 8); "Christ - if I may call on the name of the most famous of my family connections.."(p. 35); "... I'm not that much of a Philistine - in the modern sense of the word I mean; I'm not referring to our ancient tribal enemies - " (p. 60); "... my real subject, the one about which I can claim to be the world's greatest dead authority" (p. 109), etc. These and similar lapses into flat schoolboy word-play in a cynical character like Yonadab point to the temptation towards self-indulgent technical playfulness in the self-conscious novel.

But Yonadab's temporal mobility also fulfils a thematic function as when, apologizing for the squalid domestic intimacies of his introduction, he explains:

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17 "Paradoxes of Manhood," *Sunday Times Magazine*, 23 April 1972, pp. 17-18.

18 "Distancing the Past," *Jewish Quarterly* (Winter 1970/71), p. 43.

> ... Yet you must understand that I cannot come before you as an academic, would-be objective historian of a kind you are familiar with, and still less as an economist, political scientist, theologian, sociologist, or follower of any other of the learned disciplines that have become so fashionable among you in recent years. I have to be what I've always been. What that is (or was) disgusts me in many ways, I confess. Whenever I am compelled - how can I put it? - to experience myself yet again, whenever I have to endure my own consciousness once more, I find it intolerable that my interests and inclinations should be as low and limited as they are, so grovellingly personal in nature. But I cannot change them. My character is as unalterable now as my actions. (pp. 10-11).

Yonadab's given identity is inescapable even in death, and limited in life in relation to wider issues like politics and theology in which he is incapable of believing. His cynicism, for example, about Absalom's progressive plans, is aggravated by the perspective of death from which he has watched age after age make the same mistakes, so that he can see no age as unique nor take seriously any plans for social betterment. Yonadab's attitude makes explicit a sentiment pervading *The Beginners*, which lumps together spheres of human activity as so many 'fashionable disciplines' and opposes to them the 'grovellingly personal' nature of individual reality. In that novel Joel, like Yonadab, has an alienating tendency to see the time in which he lived as a repeat of an old and ugly pattern. To Yonadab, even apparently violent passions are mundane:

> ... if I sometimes feel embarrassed at the thought of how remote and archaic much of my story may appear to be, I am equally embarrassed at other times by how commonplace, how drearily familiar you will find it all. Fraternal rivalries,

> incestuous desires, the struggles between a father and his sons, the greed for possessions and power ... The recollected dead are not the only ones who have to suffer the unending nausea of repetition. (p. 8).

Distancing the past is thus impossible not only because Yonadab is forced to retell his story, but because the same basic story recurs in man's history. But it is not only the perspective of death that makes him see life as nauseatingly commonplace; in his life he was a Kantian, by which he means that the individual can come no closer to the truth than his given faculties and modes of perception permit, and of his own mode of perception he says:"...my eye never failed to find the evidence it involuntarily sought of confusion and futility in every human enterprise"(p.12).This is a warning about the reliability of the narrator, but nothing within the novel contradicts his perception: the evidence thus presented forms a pattern of experience in which futility lies in the discrepancy between the characters' understanding of themselves and the reality which they are forced to confront. The motif is an old one in Jacobson's writing: the defeat of human effort by an overarching and indifferent reality.

The rape by Amnon, King David's eldest son, of his half-sister Tamar, which occurs almost exactly half-way through the novel, is at the centre of this pattern: it is both a culmination of and reason for various futile attempts at self-transcendence. It is also at the centre of a structural pattern which Alter notes as a common feature of self-conscious novels: they exhibit, he says, "a fondness for ... working with Chinese-box constructions, or at least, repeatedly illuminating their devious narrative ways with small replicas of the innovative structure of the whole";[19] in *The Rape of Tamar* the outer structure of the novel, in which

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[19] Alter, p. 187.

the reader is an audience to Yonadab's narration, is replicated throughout in allusions to various actions as performances which force the other characters into the role of audiences, and reversed in the rape scene where the narrator himself takes on the role of observer to something enacted before him. The sexual act, one of the few human activities which can claim, however briefly, the individual's total involvement, proceeds with a volition that he cannot control, and this, of course, is its fascination for Yonadab, who is incapable of total involvement in anything.

In the rape scene Yonadab is the artist as successful manipulator and voyeur. He has stage-managed this encounter, the intimate details of which he presumes to note with powerful but remarkably unerotic precision. His own reactions are recorded like those of an organism: he is there, watching behind the archway, not simply for titillation but in order to follow through his role as manipulator and parasite on others' passions, and his posthumous role as narrator, for which his life has made him eminently suitable. Curiosity to the point of voyeurism, and a need to manipulate reality, Jacobson seems to suggest, go into making a storyteller. Manipulation of reality is the flipside of the writer's traditional task of ordering reality, and this is an ambiguity of which Yonadab is conscious:

> Call me an artist, if you like. I won't take it as a compliment. Any more than I will take it as an insult if you call me a pathologically malicious busybody who is compelled to make up for his own emotional vacuity by manipulating the passions and lives of others. Either way, I have to see my *oeuvre* completed, given its inevitable, final shape; the shape for which Amnon, Tamar and Absalom are themselves seeking, though it eludes each of them on his own. (p. 131).

Jacobson points here to the possibility of an interpretation of Yonadab's narration along both fictional and psychological lines. In terms of the latter, Amnon's rape of Tamar is an attempt at existential self-transcendence which inevitably fails. Yonadab answers the painfully understated question which interrupts his description of the rape - "Do I make it sound obscure?" - with the following interpretation of what he has seen:

> ... Brutal, painful, hasty and yet protracted, culminating at last in Amnon's throw of himself as if he would hurl himself over her head but cannot do it because he is caught, rooted fast where he is - and again he hurls himself and is jerked to a halt, again, again, until he rises high above her with a shout and topples sheer down the incline of himself - yes, it is all of these, and it is all plain enough, direct to the point of simplicity; it is what is only to be expected, a limited, predictable arrangement. (p. 84).

Amnon's desperate efforts only emphasize how trapped he is within his own human physicality, and how limited that is in scope. It can be noted in passing that these later three novels share a new reductive emphasis on bodily functions which embodies the vision described by the writer in an earlier article on pornography, of man as "... a sad, ape-like creature trapped forever behind the bars of its own being, fenced in immutably by its own body ..."[20] This physical reductiveness takes the form at times of a pretentious crudeness (e.g. about Absalom: "I would have sworn he perspired self-confidence, pissed vanity, shat ambition, shot idealism into his women" (p. 100)), but serves as an aspect of that limited non-transcendent reality which Jacobson forces his characters to face.

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[20] "An End to Pornography?" *Commentary*, XXXXII (November 1966), 76.

Yonadab reflects:

> ... Not for the first time it occurs to me that we are most closely bound to eternity when we carry out those actions to which we attach least importance - when we yawn, or scratch ourselves, or blink in a sudden blaze of sunlight, or take out our cocks and have the satisfaction of peeing against a wall, or listen absently to the conversation of bores. For then we are truly indistinguishable from one another; your nervous system is as mine; there is neither succession nor precession; only our shared, timeless commonalty. (p. 127).

The rape is the centre of a pattern of failed attempts to transcend this commonalty. Amnon, Yonadab says, "just like the rest of us... carried around with him certain uneasy, recurring apprehensions of his own worthlessness, his own absolute inconsequence" (p. 32); he is motivated by the knowledge that he means nothing at his father's court and by the hope that his defiance of the incest laws will enhance his significance as a romantic or tragic hero. He convinces himself that as a prince he must disobey the law in order to show that he is free to obey it, and elevates his desire to the status of overmastering love, succumbing to what Yonadab says *thus* becomes his fate. In other words he manages to believe that his choice is in accordance with the will of the universe. This is marvellous self-deception: Yonadab knows that the fact that one is trapped within the givens of one's own identity does not imply the comforting corollary that one's choices are dictated by God or fate. Each individual bears both limitations and guilt. The rape is facilitated by King David's reconciliation with Amnon, after which he prays believing that "his interests may indeed have become, for that lost, immeasurable moment, identical with those of the universe." This elicits Yonadab's

cynical question: "... Would it have been asking too much of that unknown Lord of Lords of his to drop him the tiniest hint about what was going on? Apparently so" (p. 63). Another facilitating illusion is that David sees Tamar, as indeed she sees herself, as a repository of moral good, and therefore accepts without question Amnon's suggestion that she be sent to soothe him.

Amnon's reaction after his night with Tamar is one of shattered acceptance of his mundanity, while hers is in turn an attempt to overcome it. Yonadab describes Amnon's repeated entries of Tamar as so many attempts "to reach a point that he seeks within her only because it is beyond his uttermost touch" or in Amnon's words, "Just another fuck" (p. 85). He turns on Tamar the following morning and drives her out of his house, with Yonadab interpreting:

> ... It wasn't any common guilt or remorse that made him turn on Tamar: but disappointment. Definitely, disappointment. He ravened in it, this baffled, stark naked idealist; this thirster after the divine, this bringer together of time and eternity, of the mundane and the transcendent; this lover of his sister. Accommodation and compromise were not for him; not then; not in his rage at the renewed discovery of his own unmodified, incurable, inglorious humanity. (p. 86).

Amnon subsequently sinks into incurable boredom and is later ignominiously butchered by Absalom's henchmen. He is as deromanticized as a villain as Tamar is as a tragic heroine. She, in turn, in an attempt "to transform the day, to transcend it, to make it yield her a meaning commensurate with what she has undergone" (p. 88), wanders, lamenting hysterically, through the streets of Jerusalem with Yonadab still the voyeur of her humiliation.

The potential pathos of her hysteria is diminished by its being shown as, at least initially, self-imposed for the sake of effect. Tamar cannot claim that it is her inevitable destiny thus to expose her shame and ruin her life: rather it becomes, like Amnon's, her destiny through her choice. She chooses the role of the honourable but ruined and therefore unwanted princess, "tied for ever to a disgrace and redemption that has no body or life; that life, indeed, can only erode and make unreal even to her, as the years pass ..." (p. 90).

And so the pattern is repeated: Absalom assumes the role of Tamar's protector which leads first to his murder of Amnon - intended as a dramatic ritual but in fact a botched and humiliating affair - and subsequently to his rebellion against his father culminating in Absalom's own death, which in its irony and ignominy is as much an image of man's absurd limitations as was the rape: lifted off his inglorious seat on an ass's back by the entanglement of his hair (the chief object of his considerable vanity) in the cleft branch of a tree, Absalom is a trapped and exposed target for his murderers.

The day itself, which Tamar attempts to transcend, participates in this movement towards fixity and defeat; it is seen as trapped within the Jerusalem stone, prescribed before it begins:

> ... With the coming of dawn it seems that the stones already contain within themselves all the colours you will see during the passage of the day, from the first grey that fills the eastern sky to the last orange glow there will be in the west just before nightfall; with every dry glaring yellow of midday, bronze of afternoon, or pink of sunset, held there unchanging, foreknown and remembered.
>
> So with the day - beginning again, entrapped in stone before it has begun - into which Tamar emerges. (p. 88).

And even Absalmon's thugs "live for ... the self-forgetfulness of action ... But how much waiting between times!" (p. 141).

The characters are trapped within by the roles they choose to play, and are simultaneously seen as characters trapped within the story Yonadab tells them about: their actions are determined in the "perpetually recurring present" (p. 182) of the narration, by the choices they had once made, in the past. The idea of role-playing, and the layering of artifice which Alter mentioned (see p.147 above) is emphasized in this novel by recurrent stage imagery. On the inmost level of artifice, that practised by the characters within their world, role-playing has practical or political motives. The court scene to which Yonadab sardonically introduces the reader is presented in terms of play-acting: "... these assemblies are a form of play-acting, for practically nothing takes place that has not been arranged beforehand," but the king enjoys them so the courtiers are forced into "play-acting pleasure at play-acting solemnity," conscious, though they pretend not to be, of the goggling outsiders, and making "a positive display of being at ease, the better to impress them" (p. 16). This is the king's show, and he is capable of interrupting its ritual with outbursts of rage or unexpected announcements to make it more compelling. Tamar's theatricality is mentioned when she is first introduced, an apparently childish and irritating trait which is put to desperate use in the successive roles of amorous accomplice, game compromiser and outraged princess, with which she attempts to save herself during and after the rape. Her confrontation with Absalom and his with David are presented as performances, with the actors simultaneously aware of the significance of their effect on their audience, and totally absorbed in their roles, to which they thus become committed beyond the duration of the performance.

This absorption in a role, particularly if so sustained as to give the character a sense of a single, whole identity, or a conception of what he is intended to be, is a source of wonder to Yonadab. He says of Amnon: "To have a destiny is nothing ... But to believe in it ... to accept it as the only one possible for you: that is something else again. Amnon is in that state, not I; I never will be" (p. 48). Not even this degree of self-knowledge, however, exempts Yonadab from attempting to grasp at a more enviable destiny than that of the cynical treacherous underling and narrator of which he has already had intimations (p. 127), nor from the humiliating failure of the attempt. This too takes place as a performance - Yonadab leaps onto David's raised throne in order to refute before the assembled lamenting courtiers the rumour that Absalom has murdered not only Amnon but all David's sons. Briefly he attains a sense of power over the king and standing amongst his fellows; but his knowledge of Absalom's plans must mean that he has betrayed his friend Amnon. The ironist himself meets an ironical end: his attempt to transcend what he is, an insignificant relative of the king's, leads to a revelation of what he is - a betrayer - and to his banishment. It is as though Willem's story had been reworked.

Yonadab's action fails because he attempts to take an active part in the events that he has helped to bring about, thus abandoning his assigned role as shadowy manipulator of the other characters. He plays friend and confidant to Amnon, and is able to manipulate him into raping Tamar; his simultaneous deception of Amnon and Absalom afterwards contributes towards the latter's mounting the scene of Amnon's murder. Yonadab's ability to understand and thus deceive others derives precisely from his lack of a single identity:

> ... there are times when I suspect myself never to have been anything more than a mind inhabited by other minds, a kind of counterfeit personality, whose ability to manipulate others was achieved only at the cost of, or was the direct result of, a permanent self-impoverishment, a never-ending haemorrhage of inner identity. (p. 100).

If his manipulation of others in life depends upon this ability, so does his recreation of their story after death. As in reality he lived vicariously through others' actions, so in recreating reality his role as narrator is as dependent on their availability as characters as their re-existence is dependent upon his narration. Given the fact that Yonadab is both implicitly and explicitly presented as a paradigm of the artist, this suggests that Jacobson sees the writer as dependent, for his sense of identity, upon the creation of fictions; or that he sees the writer's sense of identity as fragmented, so that he turns to fiction, making characters out of his fragments - an idea given metaphorical treatment in *The Wonder-Worker*. Conversely the writer loses something of himself in thus inhabiting other minds. Yonadab's admission that he is afraid of Absalom, whose total lack of irony, boredom or self-doubt (p. 100) allows Yonadab no point of identification with him, is a jauntier admission of that sense of otherness, of the limits of his own imaginative powers, which underlies his description of the landscape near his farm:

> ... Behind you the landscape is composed of features to which you can give names, as I have done: you call them hills, valleys, *wadis*, terraces, limestone bands, villages, peaks. For what is in front of you, there are no names.
>
> O yes, there is one. A dull, flat acidic burn, a leaden light: the Dead Sea. The rest is without form or shape,

> there is nothing for your gaze to rest on, nothing that compels it to go from one point to any other, nothing it returns to with any sense of renewal or reward. The lifts and falls of the earth do not make up hills and valleys, they do not go back in folds, but are merely fissured humps, random lumps and mounds of matter, all utterly bare, all of an illusory, corrupt softness of appearance ... Even the colours out there are not real colours, but, changing in the light, seem always to be in a process of becoming something other than they are ... But the imagination involuntarily seizes upon vague patches of colour, on scattered boulders, on the meetings of one crevice with others, and makes of these phantom villages or pathways; then the illusion goes and you realise that you have merely tried once again to make the unknowable conform to something you already know....
>
> There it is: the wilderness on my doorstep. It never changes; that is the nature of a wilderness. It never goes out of date, it does not lend itself to any of our plans or purposes. It does not care whether we look over it or not. It is very boring. Many roads run to its edge. (p. 51).

The passage is reminiscent of Jacobson's second novel *A Dance in the Sun*, in which landscape is depicted as antipathetic to life and which, it was suggested, expressed Jacobson's rejection not only of existing conditions in South Africa but also of any possibility of social betterment in this country. In these later novels, the protagonists' experience of landscape as indifferent to man is a measure of their private isolation; to Yonadab and Josef Baisz it indicates the limitation of their power, though as Jacobson says of Josef Baisz, they are not therefore any nicer.[21] Yonadab's

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[21] Hamilton, p. 27.

ability to force connections between people in life, his imaginative capacity to stage-manage the past into a meaningful whole in his narration, cannot proceed on a subject which by its nature exposes the illusions he creates.

His stage-management of the past is the enclosing layer of artifice in the novel. Its opening apostrophe: "Yes, I admit that the whole affair does not have the look of a charade or costume-drama of some kind" (p. 7) puts us as readers in the position of an audience who will not only listen to Yonadab's narration but will also, apparently, have it enacted before us. He reminds us that he is a "stage-manager to phantoms" (p. 18), self-consciously allowing his characters to speak ("Let the girl open her mouth again, and let me refrain from interrupting her this time" (p. 93)) and commenting on scenes that have been enacted ("The way David and his court went through that formal little performance of theirs a moment ago, you'd think I really was King Yonadab" (p. 18)). The future tense is used at times to stress the predetermined nature of the characters' actions, the present tense more commonly to emphasize their dramatic immediacy. In the short final chapter Jacobson's play on artifice suddenly proliferates with Yonadab acknowledging his status as a Biblical character in Abiathar's story (II Samuel 13), where Jacobson first read it. Having just read *his* reconstruction of Yonadab's version of the rape, one is referred back to the Court Historian's account of the event, also as heard from Yonadab. To the other traps experienced by the characters must be added the inclusive one, constituted by the pages of the book in which they exist. The image of the theatre, with the reader as part of an audience, is an illusion: "There is no theatre ... Only you, on your own, and these words which have been ascribed to me " (p. 183). The word 'ascribed' is

itself ambiguous, meaning both 'assigned' and 'attributed': thus picking up the idea that Yonadab is doomed though the particular qualifications of his character in life to being narrator of the past, and suggesting that these words are only said to be Yonadab's. In both senses, but particularly in the latter, Yonadab's penultimate sentence points outside the story to the last layer of artifice, to Jacobson ascribing words to him. Having reached this point where he seems to have examined himself out of existence, Yonadab re-asserts his reality in the startling final plea: "For God's sake, turn the page" (p. 183). One has no choice but to obey this prescription and does so with the odd sense of leaving someone behind between its pages. So finally the illusion of autonomous character is maintained.

This sustained fictional game can be compared to an example Byatt quotes as showing genuine desperation about the relationship between writer and fiction, B.S. Johnson's explosion of his illusion in *Albert Angelo* (1964): "-fuck all this lying look what i'm really trying to write about is writing...i'm trying to say something not tell a story telling stories is lies and i want to tell the truth about ... sitting here writing ..."[22] Jacobson is far from this point of self-reflexion, and does still want to tell a story. Indeed, he says of his choice of subject for this novel:

> ... What came first was a fascination with the story of the rape itself as a series of dramatic events.... The compression and completeness of the tale, its startling reversals of course, the truths about human nature hidden and revealed in the protagonists' tense words and violent actions: it was these which I wanted to explore and enlarge upon, for their own sake.[23]

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[22] Byatt, p. 33.

[23] "The King and I," p. 34.

The story is the framework for Jacobson's exploration of what remain to him 'the truths about human nature'. The self-conscious form is the ideal vehicle for this exploration, and the questions about the creation of fiction which the novel raises point primarily to Jacobson's tendency to examine his own experience, and to the variety of ways in which, as he sees it, the tension between appearance and reality operates between people and between a man and his past - and only subsidiarily to a serious preoccupation on his part with the theory of fictionality.

The Wonder-Worker

"The annunciation. On the night Timothy Fogel was conceived his mother yelled out so loudly that she was heard in distant rooms." (p. 5).

The opening sentence of *The Wonder-Worker* indicates that the story of Timothy Fogel is to be a parody; its development alternates with chapters in which the narrator describes what we take to be his real situation in a Swiss sanitorium, and it becomes apparent through his own admission and through the parallel events of his and Timothy's stories that in writing the latter the narrator is indeed parodying his own life: his father, a wealthy patron of the arts, figures as third-rate painter and second-hand dealer Gerhard, and his spirited mother as half-wit Maureen Fogel. The technique is reminiscent of the dialectic betwen fiction and reality set up by Nabokov in, for example, *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935) and *The Gift* (1963), novels which influenced Jacobson at this stage.[24]

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[24] Private correspondence, 20 March 1980.

As the novel progresses it becomes clear that this distinction between the narrator and the character he recreates is too simple; increasingly the lives collapse into one another until one is no longer certain which is reality and which is illusion. Speaking quite early on in the novel of the effect on him of Dr Wuchs' injection, the narrator suggests that both stories are his fabrications: "(Hence those 'memoirs'? *This?*)" (p. 25) and in the final chapter it is revealed that his writing has itself been an illusion, that there is nothing on the pages which he has treasured but lines and scrawls. One thing the novel does, then, is to explore the relationship between a writer and the story he tells, which for Jacobson's writers - Malcolm in *The Beginners*, Yonadab and Josef Baisz - is always in some sense a story about themselves. By placing this activity within the context of insanity, Jacobson allows himself to raise, but not answer, questions about illusion and reality: the surface of the novel, like the gemstone or prism which is its central metaphor, remains multifaceted. But insanity is also a solipsistic trap, the final stage in both the narrator's loss of a sense of external reality and in his obsession with his own life which lies behind his attempt to transform it. The notion of the trapped identity is intimately connected with the narrator's and thus with Timothy's attempts to transform their given reality, and is the final measure of the futility of such attempts.

So even the slyly mocking description of Timothy's conception and marvellous description of his birth in the opening chapter delineate his entrapment: being born, and thus given identity, is a matter in which, as the narrator later points out (p. 47), Timothy has no choice. In the following chapter, the narrator sees himself as similarly without choice in having the identities of his 'fictional' characters thrust upon him:

> ... I sat here, trapped in the lives I was writing about, unable to shift myself out of them, or to shift from myself the conviction that they belong to me. Gerhard! Maureen! Timothy! At best they're caricatures, cartoons, cheap satiric spooks and might-have-beens. I can see through them. I can see who they're parodying. I may be in a bad way, in need of a rest, 'ill', I may have made a balls-up of many things. But I'm not a complete fool. Or a tool. I still have a life of my own. (p. 15).

Asserting his own reality as against their distorted, illusory lives, he yet chooses as an analogy for what has happened to him the experience of being caught within another artist's representation of reality. His sense that he is not an altogether autonomous artist or creator is further apparent in his attribution of independent will to his characters and in the gradual breakdown of the parodic distance between narrator and character evident in the first chapter. After the next episode in their story both the distance and the close relationship that pertains between his characters and himself is asserted: this is an attack of graphomania, he says, and the doctor treating him will wonder what the characters represent in his subconscious mind. Again the process is described as having its own volition ("My hand moves, I watch the lines it makes stretch across the page, I begin again ... Then I'm filled with a renewed curiosity about the next" (p. 28))and again he recalls an incident which indicates the confusion of reality and illusion in his mind, of that morning seeing vividly a frog on the pathway where there was only a dry leaf. After the third episode the narrator is still able to see himself as offering merely his "cooperation" (p. 37) to these characters, but a greater emotional identification is made after Timothy's first painful experience of attempting to become other than what he is:

> No, no comments, no criticisms, no head-shaking,
> no expostulations, nothing. It's not my job.
> Not my responsibility.
> Still - poor little devil! (p. 44).

When, after another episode, he finds himself unable to continue with a story, his self-mockery nonetheless reveals the serious meaning that this writing has for him:

> There hasn't been a word from them all day. I don't know how to fill in my time. I sit here sucking at the end of my pen like a bloody fool. It's extraordinary how unhappy it makes me feel to think that this whole scribbling adventure may have quietly come to its end. For no reason. Just as it began.
>
> I was filled then, when it began, with a kind of panic All I knew was to shout out (silently) help! intrusion! rape! where am I etcetera? Now panic springs from the thought of being left quite on my own, to get on with being whatever I am, in this nowhere of a place, having nothing to look forward to - no developments, no surprises, no other selves to entertain. (p. 57).

It is significant that as an alternative the narrator goes down to the city and plays out to Fraulein Ilse Schwabber the role of a married English employee buying furniture for his apartment; and also that even within these "fantasies of modest domesticity in a foreign land" he is obsessed by images of entrapment, describing his apartment with self-mocking joviality as "a little box' (p. 58). The important point about the above passage is that he still sees his characters as other selves, and as such needs them.

Jacobson's description of his later novels as closer to his original idea of writing as an "other-making" activity (see p. 140 above) should be recalled in this context, especially if, as is being suggested, they represent his distancing, through parody and fantasy, of aspects of his own experience. For the narrator, Timothy's story is obviously an 'other-making' of his own life: if, as is clear by the end, he *is* Timothy, then the Fogels' degraded, lower middle-class life is perhaps the narrator's reality and his description of himself in a luxurious Swiss sanatorium is a romanticization of it, thus as much a distortion as the parody it initially appears to be. The narrator's need to create other selves arises, like Timothy's within his story, from a need to escape what he is, from 'enduring his own consciousness'. But in what sense these characters are other selves is not clear. Is the inhabiting of other identities so attractive that, as with Yonadab, the narrator's own identity 'haemorrhages' and he comes to live the life of his characters? Or are they really aspects of a life which he attempts to keep at a distance by recounting it as a story, but which finally claims him? Earlier he speaks of Timothy as: "my contemporary, who pretends to be what he isn't" (p. 29) which raises a similar ambiguity in interpretation: Does Timothy's pretence lie in his being a parody, a distorted representation of reality, or in his being presented as a parody, instead of what he is - the narrator's reality? In either case what occurs is that his knowledge of what he is is distorted, and the notion of memory accordingly pervades the novel. These are his memoirs, the narrator says in their defence, and then asks, "And if they're not mine? Should I really find that so surprising?" (p. 29). Again the question can be asked whether the creation of characters establishes

a relationship between them and the narrator as close as that between a man and his memoirs, or whether his treatment of his own life in this way endows it in his eyes with a separate life? The latter seems to be increasingly the case as Timothy's experience becomes more painful and the narrator's apparent insanity increases; he addresses Timothy directly as a separate being who has entered his room and is watching him write; but immediately afterwards describes himself: "Sitting endlessly at this desk, unable to get away from it, remembering what I must, I speak whereof I know" (p. 110). The process of memory as the narrator experiences it, as a transformer of past reality, is as obsessive and painful as the process of attempted transformations in Timothy's life.

With his apparent murder of Susie and subsequent institutionalization, Timothy's story nears its end; with a man in an institution recovering from some sort of breakdown, an identical point has been reached to that at which the narration began. This has been an attempt at creating distance between the present and the past, which cannot be changed except by the imagination; but the illusion lasts only as long as the narration itself, and the narrator is then left confronting himself. The narrator says that "after a few hours in the sanatorium it seemed to Timothy that he had been there for days. After a day, for many weeks" (p. 135), so the sense of time having passed during his narration could itself be an illusion. If Timothy and the narrator were always one, the novel has circled back to its beginning; if not, their stories could be described as two sides of a triangle which converge, their connecting reality never known. In neither case is there any way out. But the narrator has written out his memories and declares his freedom: Timothy, he insists, is a separate being; his own writing does exist, and what it contains is fabrication:

> Writing down descriptions of places I have never visited, people I have never met, deeds I have never done, I am a free man. I can honestly say that as long as I have my pen in my hand, I am almost as content with my lot as Timothy is with his. (p. 139).

This marks the fulfilment of his depressing prediction earlier, in which, aware that his time is running out, he suddenly bursts through his own despair with a realization of how different things could have been had he been able to accept his reality, had his memory been, in the words of the epigraph of *The Rape of Tamar*, more loving than inimical, less inclined to 'distance the past' by transforming it:

> How idiotic it is, I now realize, to hanker after vulgarly supernatural powers of transformation, when the powers we have can perform such marvels for us, if only we allow them to. The power of love! of memory! of imagination! To be a boy walking home with his mother, centuries ago, to a little house halfway up a huddled terrace, where a clerkly jobbing painter waits patiently in his upstairs studio ... What could be more precious than such a memory? How can I not have understood until now that to want more is in the end to have less? And less. Until one has nothing at all: neither the present nor the past. (p. 121)

'Nothing' - a connection with neither the present nor the past, is what he is left with at the end. The passage is a counterpart in the narrator's life of Timothy's earlier apprehension of reality: but where the creator can briefly conceive that his power of interpretation may have been misused, Timothy as creature can only perceive that his hopes of transformation are impotent:

> What if it were all a dream - not the changing world, but his private plans to undo the necessities that kept it together? If it would never yield, never had ...? Laurence was a petty thief. He was a fence. Mabel was ugly. Susie didn't care for him. None of it mattered in the least. That was the truth. There was no other. (p. 108).

If the first passage quoted is the narrator's realization of what a loving imagination could have made of his reality, the second is the product of a distorted vision. Like *The Rape of Tamar*, *The Wonder-Worker* is basically about the limitations of any individual's vision and his inability to escape these.

In Timothy's story, the attempt to transcend himself is related to the perception that whatever is other to himself is capable of yielding possibilities beyond the limitations of his own life. This is analogous to the impulse towards fictional creation: both seek identification with and power over the world thus perceived. Timothy's first apprehension of the otherness of the world occurs when he is four years old and the swing on which he is attempting to stand suddenly tilts, leaving him hanging upside down. Humour modulates suddenly into an almost sinister description of the "shock of the world ... upon him":

> He sees how it is. It is other. It does not yield. It is magnified and black. It shines from myraid points of light ... he is at the gates of the implacable silence and insentience revealed to him. Tiny, they are spacious. Motionless, they are charged with power. Impenetrable, they offer him their sovereign peace. Indifferent, they have always waited for him. (p. 22).

Even as a child the world of matter seems to him superior to human life; looking down on London he sees the city as a great rock, "a phenomenon of nature, as adventitious as any other, having nothing to do with the plans and directions of men. For that very reason he and everybody else who lived in its crevices and humps seemed to him to be intruders. All of them. One day they would have to go" (p. 36). The inhospitable environment which alienates man here takes on a bizarre form appropriate to Timothy's story. His own desire to escape from the world of sentience into that of matter occurs, when, as a schoolboy, he has suffered intense humiliation at Susie's hands. Wanting to do away with his memory of the day, to destroy his own consciousness, he leans his forehead against a wall and succeeds in 'becoming' brick. This is the first of many experiences in which he seems to become other than what he is; as a child he believes that this is how everyone bears "their individual sentience, their severence from the materials of which they were composed" (p. 46), and after his mother's death he becomes obsessed again with incorruptible substances, with gemstones as the purest "thoughts of God" (p. 132). While his life remains ineffectual and humiliating, the gods of matter whom he serves promise him transformation if he will only be patient. The process is itself like waiting for a crystal to grow to perfection, an image which bridges two episodes in Timothy's life (p. 70), thus applying as much to the narrator's activity as to Timothy's:

> He knew and did not know that everything he read was eventually to fuse into a single gem in his mind; that the symmetries enclosing him right at the end were to be without flaw or occlusion; that the whole world would by then have become his perfect prison.
>
> I mean, prism. (p. 113).

The two are one and the same: the prison of insanity in which the mind is more than ever locked into its own vision, and the prism which splits light. Thus Timothy's withdrawal from the real world is accompanied by fragmentation of his vision: after his first encounter with the 'other' he sees his father's face in terms of the shapes that make it up; after his mother's death he developes the habit of staring so long at parts of his body that they cease to have meaning but appear instead as shapes and lines; and after his transformation of Susie he holds in his hand all the aspects of her "that had most baffled and humiliated him ... transformed at last into the thoughts of God":

> ... Susie's malice, a green zircon. Her lust, an eight-sided ruby. Her intellect, cloudy topaz. Her pregnancy: a citrine within which was occluded another complete, perfect crystal of citrine. Her pride, a small diamond. Her fear, a lump of yellow talc. Her fate, rock salt. (p. 133)

The fragmentation of his vision means, literally, that he cannot see reality as a whole, nor Susie as a whole person. He can transform her only by destroying her life and is left, like the narrator, with nothing.

The transformation of life into a fixed form destroys it; the wonder-worker is left with neither the object of his desire nor the certainty of his creation and is alone in understanding it: if this is a statement about the creative act, it is a highly ironical or profoundly disillusioned one. Pearl K. Bell's interpretation takes the novel rather optimistically at face value:

> All the glittering facets of *The Wonder-Worker* - Timothy's gift of metamorphosis, the narrator's labour of recollection, the richly lyrical speculation on the secrets of time and

> memory - are highly charged images of the creative act, the obsession that drives a novelist to convert the raw matter of transient experience into the miraculous permanence, the autonomous reality of art.[25]

The 'autonomous reality of art' is denied by the meaningless lines and scrawls that cover the narrator's papers. *The Wonder-Worker* contains many images of the creative process, but the creative process functions itself primarily as the paradigmatic attempt to transcend reality. The narrator's transcendence is enclosed by the degradation from which his attempt has arisen, which accumulates in the novel and has its own "sharp cooperative phase transition" (p. 70) from the luxurious sanatorium of the penultimate chapter to the perfect crystal/prism/prison of the final chapter. Rather than the possibilities of imaginative freedom being affirmed, the strongest impression left by the novel is of cumulative degradation. The narrator's parody of his life expresses his own shame at his background. Timothy's father, like Yonadab's, is described as 'craven' and his job as a painter of signs and café backdrops is a source of shame to his son. As a young man Timothy is described walking through the streets where he had passed his "blank, squirming infancy, his childhood, his degraded boyhood" (p. 65). Maureen's mind is affected in a bomb incident during the war, Gerhard's spirit broken by his wartime experience as a German Jew: he first courts Maureen because "the panic in her eyes ... gave him a sense of security" (p. 31) and their marriage is recorded with brutal humour:

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[25] "The Gift of Metamorphosis," *New Leader*, 1 April 1974, p. 18.

> It was towards the end of the war. Food was rationed. Coal was rationed. Many bombed-out buildings gaped in astonishment at others even more ruined than themselves. The nights were like caverns. Comforts of any kind were hard to come by. Accordingly, the half-man proposed to the half-wit, and was accepted on the turn. (p. 32).

For both Yonadab and Timothy, shame at their families is a symptom of their alienation from their own lives. Yonadab's partner in alienation, Amnon, who becomes his victim, has a counterpart in Timothy's friend Laurence, who seeks escape from his disgust at his family by stealing, and by destroying the wealth and luxury he does not have. Timothy's Jewishness also functions as a source of clichéd humiliation, with the force of the writer's irony directed at anti-Semitic paranoia. Wade had hoped that after *The Beginners* the experience of being a Jew would take over from the experience of being a South African, as the serious preoccupation of Jacobson's novels [26] *The Rape of Tamar* treated the ancient Hebrew world with irreverence and the Jewishness of its characters was as Bell points out, of no importance to Jacobson's purpose,[27] and in *The Wonder-Worker* the serious implications of being Jewish are mocked by the context or insanity and absurdity in which they are raised. For the narrator, Jewishness is a source of cynicism in his description of the other sanatorium guests: "Many of the Americans are Jews. Many of

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[26] Wade, "Apollo, Dionysus," p. 79.

[27] Bell, p. 17

the more decrepit Germans are old enough to have been Jew-Killers...." (p. 24), and of insane suspicions as regards the doctor who is treating him: "What did he do with himself between 1939 and 1947? ... We know how much and what sort of employment the Nazis found in their camps and elsewhere for cooperative doctors" (p. 96). The war experience is one of the memories that he knows should be behind him, but his guilty consciousness of Jewish persecution emerges in Timothy's story as one of the many details which make his childhood seem bizarre. The park in which he goes to play has "a merry-go-round in the shape of one of those cages in which Jews and felons were once suspended from church towers" (p. 20), and later it is a tool in Susie's humiliation of him and the issue over which he betrays his father (p. 107). This is a familiar theme: he had betrayed his mother previously and will betray his friend Laurence when the time comes. Timothy's obsession with Susie is thus never without a need to establish power over her (see, e.g. p. 39), although through it he also perpetuates his own pain - as does the narrator in his obsession with Timothy's story (p. 98). Both power and masochism are embodied in Timothy's fantasies-within-a-fantasy of what he would do to Susie and her lover were she his wife (p. 117), and humiliating assertions of power are shown to be characteristic of human relationships. Susie, for example, takes pleasure in seeing her two ungainly admirers, Mabel and Timothy, embracing:

> ... She would like to see them performing other tricks. Balancing balls on the ends of their noses. Bursting through hoops of coloured tissue paper. Walking on ropes suspended above the ground. Begging for crumbs. (p. 107)

The world of shame and humiliation and its resistance to human transcendence has once again been probed; where before it was part of Jacobson's examination of the social realities of his past, now it dominates his images of the process of writing and colours his description of London, his home for twenty-six years. Where in his earlier articles he spoke with wonder of London's variety and destiny, here these qualities are parodied in claustrophobic images of lower-middle class terraced housing, with "many roofs of slate and tile, clambering upon one another like heaps of shamelessly mating crustaceans" (p. 8). As this vision pervades his fantasy of his ancient Jewish past, and that of his present, so it pervades his fantasy of his South African background in *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*. It seems that if he cannot transcend the rag-and-bone shop of his own experience, he at least attempts to distance it by an inimical imagination.

The Confessions of Josef Baisz.

The Confessions of Josef Baisz recalls both Karel Schoeman's *Na die Geliefde Land* (1972) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Its setting is the Republic of Sarmeda, a kind of South Africa-sur-Volga[28] of which Jacobson says: "I've deliberately taken aspects of totalitarianism which belong equally to regimes of the so-called left and the so-called right - with strong satiric or caricatural elements added."[29] It is

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[28] C.J. Driver's expression aptly summarizes the blend of Afrikaans and Russian in the nomenclature, the blend of political systems caricatured. "A Somewhere Place," *New Review*, IV (October 1977), 49.

[29] Hamilton, p. 25.

perhaps because of this mixture that the novel lacks the focused political nightmare vision and critique of either Schoeman's or Orwell's novels, though it has been hailed as "the most chilling and profound and moving portrait of life under totalitarianism now in our literature" and as "ingenious, omninous, disturbing, all too prophetic."[30]

These comments indicate again the critical tendency to seek a moral voice in Jacobson's work, though this seems to be precisely what he is in reaction against."The novel isn't political in the sense that it's intended to provide a horrible warning to all liberal-minded and right-thinking readers on what could go wrong,"[31] he says, but the point can be more strongly made: it is a declaration of freedom from the necessity of addressing liberal-minded people at all. Jacobson insists that race isn't the issue, merely sketching the very South African detail of "the mounted Kuni tribesmen, in their multi-coloured blankets and wide straw hats, driving their cattle on the long trek from the Middlebergen towards the winter grazing grounds which our enlightened government carefully preserved for them" (p. 13). Driver says that he would like to "know more of the Kuni and Sedi, those oddly invisible tribes of Sarmeda" [32] but in their invisibility lies a clue to this novel's significance in terms of Jacobson's work as a whole. He is free enough of his South African past to be able to rework its most sensitive social issue without any more special comment than the heavy irony which is Josef Baisz's habitual tone. It is as though Jacobson were saying:

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[30] Quoted on the jacket of the Penguin (1979) edition of the novel.

[31] Hamilton, p. 25.

[32] Driver, p. 50.

'Yes, I know those Kuni tribesmen deserve more attention from a writer with my background. I choose not to give it.' One sense in which the novel is a private joke is apparent in the nomenclature,which to a South African often comes as an amusing dig-in-the-ribs even during the most solemn passages. One hears, for example, of the great Lecke Lake, the various institutions of control in Sarmeda: "... M.P.C., B.S.D., S.C.O.P.P., Compresecor, External Affairs, ..." (p. 32), the Heerser as ruler, the Sixteenth of December University, and for the English-speaking Johannesburger, a fellow is an *ouck* and Josef sits in 'Jobber Park.'

The humour is clever and dismissive rather than satirical. But for a writer who felt himself a South African for too long, it is obviously an achievement of freedom. Driver calls the novel "the pulling together of all his exiles - from Russia, from Israel, from South Africa ... a triumphant solution to what could be regarded as ... a problem of the exiled imagination."[33] Like all three later novels *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* abstracts the writer's condition of exile into its own alien or fantasy setting, but here the exiled imagination is able to incorporate into this abstraction aspects of the home country. Perhaps in doing so Jacobson eventually, as Cronin says of *The Beginners*, lays the ghost of a troublesome past.[34]

Jacobson's comment about literature as an other-making activity has been noted (see p. 138 above). This takes a distinct form in his creation of the fantasy Republic of Sarmeda in *The Confessions of Josef Baisz:* "I must have been about two-thirds of the way through this book when I suddenly

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[33] Ibid., pp. 49-50.

[34] Cronin, p. 81.

remembered a game I used to play by myself when I was a boy - which was in effect to make up a country. I didn't tell myself stories about it, I just used to write out lists of its institutions and personages, from the president downwards."[35] But for Jacobson the primary meaning of fantasy, which will be discussed below, appears to be the licensing of feelings not allowed in real life. The reader becomes an accomplice through literature to various actions which he can at the same time judge: "My particular attraction to the idea of complicity has something to do with my sense of how much a novel is like a reverie. What is primary in reading? Escape and retreat into ourselves, and into forbidden areas of ourselves."[36] The notion of complicity has some fascination for him, and is central to the *Confessions of Josef Baisz*. Jacobson mentions that Thomas Mann's novel *The Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man* (1954) was in his mind while he was writing this novel,[37] and the identifying ploy of the confidence man is to cheat only those who are themselves ready to cheat.[38] Trichardt and Gita Serle and Ritchie Mainckies reveal themselves ready to cheat before they become Josef's victims, and Trude is also an accomplice to his psychological cruelty towards her. But where Felix's confidence games are shown to arise from his love of life which makes him imitate its most colourful manifestations, Josef Baisz betrays others because only by having them in his power can he love them. Jacobson's novel is not like Mann's a hilarious exploration of illusions and fictions, but a psychological

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[35] Hamilton, p. 27.

[36] Hayman, Dan Jacobson in interview, p. 45.

[37] Ibid., p. 46.

[38] John G. Blair, *The Confidence Man in Modern Fiction* (London: Vision Press, 1979), p. 12.

study of betrayal, complicity and shame, in short a study of that cluster of experiences to which his imagination has always returned.

In the "Translator's Preface" which precedes the novel proper, the plea for complicity is made: the reader must "ask whether he can recognise any of his own motives - in a grossly distorted form, no doubt - in Baisz's account of the impulses which drove him through his career as bodyguard, police-spy, kidnapper, murderer, and favoured son of the regime" (p. 3-4). One significant thing about this Preface, which is only apparent in retrospect, is that the man who delivers the manuscript to the 'Translator' is Josef's bodyguard, who betrays him by calling it "the autobiography of a scoundrel" (p. 2) just as Josef had become bodyguard to a number of people only to betray them. The intimacy and 'inherent ambiguity' of the relationship between a man and his bodyguard is what prompted Jacobson to explore it.[39]

The Preface thus forms part of one of the closed circles on which the novel is structured; another is that Josef's psychological downfall is brought about by a confrontation with his sister, for like Yonadab and Timothy before him, Josef is ashamed of his family and his background, and wants to escape them."But the greatest advantage of having spent my childhood there," he remarks of his home town, "was that it made me so eager to get away!... Had such sights and sounds not made a daydreamer of me I would never have been impelled into action. Had I not felt so acutely my own insignificance, I would never have tried so hard to do anything about it" (pp. 7-8). The landscape described is recognizable from Jacobson's writing on South Africa, as is Josef's feeling of being rendered insignificant by its vastness. That longing for the cultivation

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[39] Hayman, p. 45.

of the Cape expressed by the narrator in *A Dance in the Sun*, and Jacobson's admiration for England as expressed in numerous articles, is recalled in Josef's outburst:

> These southerners! I had never been south of the mountains before, and everyone I had seen since getting off the train had a peculiar metropolitan glamour in my eyes.... Their imagined existence had always had the power to make our lives, on the wrong side of the mountains, seem almost unreal, wanting in some final quality of seriousness. (pp. 34-5).

But the self-reflexive irony of both narrator and writer is later apparent when Josef speaks of the "imbecile sense of self-satisfaction known only to provincials who find themselves living in the metropolis" (p. 46).

Of his family Josef speaks with shame and rage. Going back home as a young man seems to annihilate all that he has achieved while away, so that he feels trapped in the smallest and meanest aspects of his own life: "Here I was; here was the family I came from, here was its history; I would never manage to make myself different from the rest - father miserably dead, mother crazy, one sister a whore, the other a betrayed girl, an object of sniggers and charity" (p. 65). Perversely, in order to perpetuate these feelings, he maintains his involvement with his sister Beata and his mother, feeling only after his mother's death that the discharge from the family for which he had so often longed had been given to him (p. 182). He leaves not intending to keep contact with Beata, but it is her appeal to him and his betrayal of her which causes her psychological breakdown. This is not altogether well motivated, but is necessary for

Jacobson's theme: that a man cannot deny who he is, and the family is one tangible aspect of that given identity; that he will always be made to confront what he has avoided.

Josef's acts of betrayal are themselves attempts to transcend himself. After betraying his mistress, for example, he says: "... the action itself was its reward. That feeling of absolution and renewal it produced; the conviction of being in command of my own life once again - there was nothing like it!" (p. 75). In his ultimate work as prison reformer he subtly coerces political convicts into "the astounding sense of absolution and liberation, of being beyond any possible forgiveness, and therefore no longer needing it, which was the ultimate reward for every act of betrayal and self-betrayal" (p. 176); and his final act before his suicide is the self-betrayal of writing his confessions. But it is an obsession from which he seeks release:

> To wound and to love; to love what I wounded; to betray and look pityingly upon the consequences of my treachery; and to do it again - and again - and again - and each time as if for the very first time, with a trembling, magnetised sense of fate or inevitability upon me: that was my addiction. And like any other addict I dreamed that precisely that which enslaved me would enable me to burst through the walls of circumstance, through the confines of the self, into a realm of unconditioned freedom. (p. 120).

His realization that unconditional freedom is not only impossible, but absurd to contemplate, comes with sickening finality at the end of Chapter XV:

> First. In some deeply hidden childishly expectant part of myself, in some hitherto unreachable (and unteachable) chamber of my soul, I had been cherishing a hope that if I served my God of falsity and double-dealing with sufficient zeal, if I did all he could possibly ask of me, he would in the end, reward me. Not just with excitement and worldly advantage and a sense of accomplishment; but ultimately, and above all, by discharging me from his service. By setting me free. By letting my serve a less demanding master.
> Second. He was never going to do it. (pp. 131-32).

Like Yonadab and Timothy, he is trapped into the service of his baser impulses. The most real experience available to them all involves the degradation of themselves and the destruction of human relationships.

Yonadab was unable to maintain a single sense of identity, and Timothy's 'otherness' was reflected in the literal and metaphorical fragmentation of his vision. Josef Baisz is in turn fascinated by the binary opposition epitomized in his career as bodyguard. Even before he becomes a bodyguard he expresses his belief that: "Everything's double. And double again. Even God needs the devil to make something of himself" (p. 21). Double-dealing is, for people who fantasize other lives for themselves, a means towards fulfilment and a sense of their own reality (p. 42). Josef's psychological collapse occurs when the Heerser comes at his invitation to address the Volmaran Collective Labour Colony (a *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* kind of name but geographically a Robben Island), of which Josef is Moral Guidance Officer. Ironically, Josef sees this as the climax not only of his political career but also of his philosophy:

> ... This was the place where power and powerlessness were to meet in naked confrontation, stripped of all disguise or palliation. Each was to know itself better, by looking face to face at its opposite. The truth about their relationship was to be made plain to all. (pp. 193-94)

In *The Confessions of Felix Krull*, Felix's fascination with the double image is a source of poetic inspiration to him and great amusement to the reader. Josef's pursuance of the double image takes a crueller form, for his duplicity is fulfilled in actual possession of the women whose husbands he has betrayed, not like Felix in seeking counterpart women. Such possession primarily satisfies his desire to despise the women whose shame, complicity and self-delusion allows them to be possessed. On Gita Serle, whose husband Josef has pushed down a flight of stairs and crippled, he is particularly merciless:

> ... She had convinced herself that her responsibility for the crime was equal to mine; she admired me for the depth of passion I had revealed in committing it; she admired herself for rousing such passion in me; she believed us to be bound together forever by the guilty secret we shared. Bound together on the highest plane, needless to say. With plenty of sad smiles, quivering lips, distant gazes, and pure, pacifying touches of the hand. And only the occasional lapse, when circumstances favoured it, and we rolled together on the matrimonial bed, ramming our hairy loins together like any other ordinary, unregenerate couple. (p. 130).

A certain humour compounded of blatancy, bathos and shame is intended; with varying degrees of humour this compound pervades all the sexual encounters described in Jacobson's later novels. The rape of Tamar is

such a scene; in *The Wonder-Worker* the source of delicious jealousy to Timothy, and ultimate evidence of his father's ineptitude, is his mother's pragmatic affair with the rent-collector. When Timothy one day surprises them together, Gerhard takes him for a walk to explain:

> ... So much fuss over such a little thing! A childish business! 'Huggy, cuddly, snuggly - putting handy pandies into this place and that ... where they don't usually go. Babies want to play like that, and children. And when we're grown up, then we have to do it sometimes ...
>
> (*The Wonder-Worker*, p. 51)

And Josef describes his sexual encounters with poor, hobbling Edith from the café:

> Edith was usually awkward and timid, but she sometimes went in for fits of childish high spirits which had always appealed to me. That night her trick was to pretend to be an octopus, of all things, with tendrils waving, eyes staring and a tiny triangular mouth, the mouth gave her a great deal of trouble. But she got it right in the end. And put it in the right places. (p. 72).

So on the most basic level of encounter, people are alienated from one another as from themselves. Examples of degradation and self-delusion can be enumerated in this novel as in the previous two. Ian Hamilton in his interview with Jacobson (1977) implies a certain uneasiness about the unscrupulous character who mediates this view of life, and repeatedly probes the writer's lack of moral voice in these novels. Jacobson admits in the course of this interview that he has lost his sense of moral obligation as a writer and that even though he is now teaching English,

this has not revived his sense of literature as a morally uplifting sphere of activity: Leavis' earlier influence has worn off. To Hamilton's probing he gives various answers:

i. "... The giving of enjoyment, the taking out of the reader from himself, the creation of new, whole fantasy experiences seems to me the most important job that fiction does ...";

ii. "... if I wanted to make out a case for literature on moral grounds I would do so by saying that it actually lifts from us the burden of the moral injunctions by which we generally live ...";

iii. Josef is "far more like most of us than most of us care to acknowledge" and the reader is a kind of accomplice who is also able to judge him;

iv. in literature the bad characters tend to be better realized than the good, which Jacobson suggests means that we all fantasize more about "being bad and greedy than about things";

v. and finally, implicitly admitting some worry about his morality, he suggests that the later novels do in fact incorporate 'resistances' to the fantasies which they develop. [40]

To take the last point first: Jacobson speaks of the resistance in any novel as being "conveyed by the degree of life a writer gives to everything in a book which doesn't share the hero's impulses or view of things" and adds: "I hope that the people around Josef Baisz, even though we see them through his eyes, do have an independent life of their own, which they oppose to his."[41] He mentions King David in *The Rape of Tamar* and Beata in *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* as examples. Certainly David's credulity

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[40] Hamilton, pp. 26-29

[41] Ibid., p. 27, and private conversation, June 1980.

stands in polar opposition to Yonadab's consuming cynicism, as does Beata's dogged loyalty to Josef's obsessive course of betrayal. But this does not mean that as characters they set up alternative, equally realized ways of being to the central characters. David may escape Yonadab's understanding but his self-delusion is not merely a matter of Yonadab's jaundiced view: he *is* deluded in his prayer and deceived by Amnon and Absalom. That he is resilient enough to survive these experiences does not free him from the pattern of which they form a part. Beata is a wizened, pitiful creature, finally beaten by the system which her brother has learned to manipulate. The events of her life bear out her shabbiness, i.e. it is also not a matter of Josef's perception.

Jacobson also offers the landscapes as resistances,which remind the characters of the world they cannot control. Hamilton remarks that Josef's response to landscape seems of a quite different order of sensitivity from his response to other people's feelings, to which Jacobson replies:

> I hope that's true. If you like, it's another aspect of the resistance the book offers to Josef Baisz. One of the reasons why he responds so strongly to landscapes is that they are indifferent to him, and he knows it. That doesn't make him a nicer person, the sense of being surrounded by a vast natural indifference in fact goads him on ...[42]

In that case, it is not clear in what sense it can be said to offer him resistance. The point can be made in contrast to the other works which Jacobson cites in illustration of how he sees morality and resistance

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[42] Ibid.

working in literature: *Dombey and Son* in which he says Dickens seems to like Dombey so much more than Florence; *King Lear* in which "part of our pleasure ... springs from seeing him do forbidden things"; Macbeth whose evil intentions coexist with his conviction that they are evil. In all three he sees a certain risk involved in the writer's allowing himself to fantasize about evil.[43] But the difference is that in these works the resistances are palpable: in *King Lear* the voice of reason and humanity is well represented by Edgar and the fool; the potential from which Macbeth declines is present as part of his tragedy even while Shakespeare 'risks' himself in exploring the decline. This means that Macbeth's self-examination is of a different order to that of Yonadab, Timothy and Josef when they break the surface of their beings, look around disgusted for a moment and promptly submerge themselves again. In Dickens the evil characters are balanced by the good even if the former are often more convincing; they are balanced too by many minor human foibles and gestures which, if they do not carry moral weight, do testify to the writer's interest in a variety of human possibilities. Herein lies the insufficiency of what Jacobson sees as the novels' internal resistances to the central characters: the world of each novel *is* as the narrator sees it, not by definition because he is a first-person narrator (Felix's world for example, is not) but because the writer himself does not appear to be convinced about anything other than the cynicism of each narrator's perception.

An acquaintance with Jacobson's novels gives one the sense of a creative imagination returning irresistibly to the same motifs, fascinated by the things which repel it. Dominant preoccupations recur: the sycophants whose

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[43] Ibid., p. 29.

prototypes are Willem and Gottlieb, who reappear as minor characters in *The Beginners* and *The Wonder-Worker* and flock *The Rape of Tamar* and *The Confessions of Josef Baisz*; the betrayer; the family as a source of shame; the woman as victim. It is surely indicative of a certain imaginative limitation that in eight novels the unsatisfactorily realized Isabel is the only woman who is not a victim, and even she is, briefly, of Kenneth's sexual revenge. As to the other female characters, Mrs. van Schoor sings through a private world of insanity; Mrs Fletcher feels imprisoned in her house; Riva Gottlieb is only shown caught in her home; bullied and chewing her fingernails; Sarah Glickman haunts her own home, suffering insomnia; Tamar is a rape victim, Susie a murder victim and Gita and Trude victims of betrayal and psychological cruelty. If Jacobson is a defeatist as regards social reform, his novels express the private counterpart of this feeling, defeatism as regards human relationships. The voice that he finds in his later novels - cynical first-person, self-obsessed - allows this defeatism to function as a manifestation of the form.

So when Jacobson speaks of the creation of fantasy experiences his meaning is specific: he assumes that his fantasies are universal and will afford a certain escape for the reader who shares but suppresses them. Rather than being 'new whole fantasies,' however, these novels reinforce a world view which has already been delineated in the earlier work; catharsis is not granted out of the worlds created in these novels, which remain, despite the narrators' failures within them, unopposed.

Jacobson invokes Dickens as the novelist he admires most, in speaking of the technique of the later novels:

> ... He saw what he saw with an astonishing vividness - with such vividness that it seems like a new object in the world. It seems to me that's the greatest kind of prose writing a novelist can produce - where we recognize what's written about but see it transformed, or as if in a flash of lightning - with that kind of brightness. That's the kind of writing ... I'd like to produce. [44]

He sees it possible to work towards this heightened effect from the side either of realism or of fantasy. J.P. Stern, discussing the many deviations and elaborations in Dickens, says:

> Yet however different the moods, what informs his evocations is always an unabating *interest* in this world and in this society ...
>
> ... the delight in the elaboration of the circumstances of living situations and encounters ... will often get the better of the narrative line. Franz Kafka ... is critical yet full of admiration mixed with envy. It is all *so* unlike what he himself can ever hope to do, he writes in his diary ... for 'Dickens is all richness and heedless overflowing'. [45]

The Wonder-Worker and *The Confessions of Josef Baisz* particularly, are indeed dense with imagery and physical description, but this paradoxically reinforces their rigidity - thus, for example, even Josef's description in passing of a fountain in a park, picks up images of fixity and struggle: "At this distance it was impossible to distinguish the bronze nymph in the middle of the pool from the pair of dolphins with which she perpetually grappled" (p. 108). Far from 'heedless overflowing' one has the sense of a

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[44] Hayman, p. 46.

[45] *On Realism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 5.

writer manipulating his medium in a way which hints at epiphany only to incline back to a known point. Stern's citation of Kafka is interesting, as Jacobson's earlier views on Kafka could apply to his own later novels:

> ... Dostoevsky may have been a hateful man, and as diseased as Kafka in his private life; but if we set against any of Kafka's fables the fable of 'The Grand Inquisitor' from *The Brothers Karamazov*, we have to grant Dostoevsky a kind of nobility as a writer which Kafka is altogether without. Dostoevsky's fable has the nobility of true protest, of true rebellion, of a spirit trying to beat through the walls of its own limitations, instead of merely walking around within the walls and examining them minutely, fanatically, even lovingly, having lost all hope of reaching the world outside itself.[46]

'Nobility' is obviously irrelevant to Jacobson's purpose in the later novels, but where these remarks are relevant is in their pinpointing of a severely limited world of experience as a weakness in a novelist's work. This is not simply a moralistic point about the unredeemable nature of such a world. If there is one great failing of these novels, it is that for all the new techniques used, they merely refine old perceptions. Having abandoned the various attempts in his South African fiction to depict ways out of the traps of individual identity, the limitations of Jacobson's imaginative scope emerge finally in the abstraction of the later novels.

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[46] "Franz Kafka: A Voice from the Burrow," in *Time of Arrival*, p. 186.

CONCLUSION

As a novelist Jacobson attempts through various forms to give expression to his view of the nature of life, while both resisting and accepting the obligations laid on him as a liberal South African writer to make the right judgements about this morally sensitive country. The uneasiness that characterizes his early overt social protest can in part be explained by the fact that the view of life which emerges even from the South African novels is too pessimistic to sustain liberal protest of the kind which permeates a certain tradition of South African literature. This pessimism finds a voice in the cynicism and shame of the later three narrators; the fact that they are first-person narrators telling their own stories reinforces Jacobson's view of individual life as it emerges from his earlier work, as isolated and trapped within the confines of a given identity.

The self-reflexive problematic form of these novels also intensifies earlier thematic concerns, as the central characters are thus forced into a greater degree of self-examination than the earlier characters, and Jacobson's own concern with the Jewish and South African aspects of his past becomes an examination of the process of writing. The later three novels constitute a declaration of freedom from giving Jewishness or South Africanness the earnest literary treatment they had earlier received.

A significant parallel exists between Jacobson's imaginative break with South Africa in his later fiction and his actual break with the

country twenty years previously. The relief he felt on settling in England at the indifference of English society to him and his own peripheral position in relation to it, is echoed in his sense of liberation and exhilaration on finding after *The Beginners* that he could no longer write about the country that had placed obligations on him as a writer, but was adopting instead the voice of an unscrupulous character. In both cases what is essentially taking place is that Jacobson is dissociating himself from a previous identity and its moral requirements. His immigration was an abstraction out of its original context, of his sense of alienation, so that it became instead of a localized emotional state - of being alienated in his home country - a description of his status as an exile. He sought the abstract experience of isolation, saying of his first months in London: "I wanted to feel within myself the dissolution of all that I had been before by name and background."[1] But dissolution was not so simple: his background dominated four novels written after his immigration. Similarly, though Jacobson claims that the later three novels constitute his second round as a novelist, they intensify rather than depart from the themes of his South African fiction. The individual's sense of being trapped within his own limitations, an experience which the earlier characters in various ways came to face, is abstracted into the very state of being in which the later characters are presented.

Jacobson's break with South Africa in his fiction can thus be seen as the artistic counterpart of his earlier immigration to England in that it is both a release from and an affirmation of all that has

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[1] "Time of Arrival," in *Time of Arrival*, p. 18.

preceded it. His imagination returns again and again to motifs already present in his first novels: in this sense, if the notion of the trapped identity is the thematic link between his novels, Jacobson's career as a novelist can be said to prove his point.

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